

Socialism, democracy and organisation

First thoughts on the Platform of the Iranian comrades. By Jean Phillippe Dives

This article has been translated from the French socialist discussion journal Carré Rouge

In No 8 of Carré Rouge we published substantial extracts from the proposed Minimum Platform drawn up by a group of Iranian revolutionary Marxists. This article is the first of our proposed contributions to the discussion.

It concentrates on only a few aspects of the Platform, on matters which are already being discussed in our journal. Articles in earlier issues have dealt with one subject or another; in particular, there were exchanges on "socialism and democracy" at the first Carré Rouge day-schools, held last June.

Once the discussion had begun various contributions expressed different approaches and different points of view. This article, which necessarily takes sides, is a contribution to a discussion which we hope will be continued, with the Iranian comrades as well as within and beyond the pages of Carré Rouge.

Socialism and Stalinism

The Platform opens with a section on The Meaning of Socialism and shows that "the socialist programme is inevitably defined by its socialist goal". On this basis it asserts that "we cannot expect tendencies who disagree on the basic goals of socialism to unite and establish a new alliance of [the] revolutionary left ... Those who called this bloc (the former USSR, and its satellites, China and Albania) 'socialist' and have not yet revised this position, have proved in practice that they have no place inside the revolutionary left". This definition may seem arbitrary, but it is totally justified. A revolutionary Marxist project, if it is a serious one, is obliged to establish itself positively: that is, we must organise ourselves on the basis of what we want and what we are fighting for. In order to do that we must define socialism, and not simply say that it is opposed, however radically, to the capitalist system. That may appear obvious, but what happens in practice is not necessarily what is obvious. For instance there is one method of revolutionary party-building, and it has a number of adherents, which defines itself as "anti-capitalist", but does not put the fight for socialism on the same level, perhaps because they are not brave enough; it is a method that begins not from general objectives and principles but from tactical questions of agenda and circumstance, such as the contents of an emergency programme or a turn to the unions.

There is another reason why the the starting point of the Platform is valid: today, no revolutionary socialist worthy of the name can avoid taking stock of the results of Stalinism and drawing conclusions from it. We have

seen what it achieved, how far its work went to destroy both consciousness and organisation in the workers movement. Unless we make an effort to understand Stalinism and through that effort be able to explain the bureaucratic systems that have existed, and which still survive in some countries and fraudulently claim to be socialism, it will not be possible, in theory or practice, to attempt to reopen the socialist perspective. However, if we do make this effort we shall be able to show how completely distinct we socialists are from the Stalinists.

We should respond to the call of the Iranian comrades for a discussion. It is important to do this as many concepts inspired by Stalinism have found their way into the revolutionary movement, including some organisations which claim to be Trotskyist. One of the most serious problems is the "statist" distortion of the socialist perspective, and it is one which still influences many revolutionary Marxist organisations in different ways: making things state property, or nationalisation, is thought to be the goal, or at least a positive step in itself on the road to emancipating the workers.

Not even the collapse of the USSR was enough to sweep away such a conception. The dramatic results of capitalist restoration that we observe now have even revived the idea that the system of state property that existed before 1991 was, despite all its shortcomings, a "gain" of the workers' movement. We cannot deny that there is common sense behind this understanding: if you ignore the problem of freedom (if it is possible to do that), the Russian working class had a better standard of living before 1991 than they do now.

However, this way of understanding avoids consideration of the problem of the terrible cost, mainly human, but ecological as well, of the "conquests of the working class": terror, massacres, vast quantities of forced labour which amounted to semi-slavery. And it does not take into account the fact that the short time when the material conditions of the Soviet workers really improved corresponded roughly with the post-war economic boom in the world capitalist economy (the "thirty glorious years") during which the situation of the masses improved, relatively, not only in the west as well, but even in some parts of the southern hemisphere.

From this point of view, those revolutionaries who still cultivate nostalgic feelings about the USSR have a position and an attitude parallel to that of the "anti-neoliberals" who have nostalgic feelings about the welfare state and its role of "regulator" in the developed capitalist countries. Both groups are looking back to an age that is past; the task now is to rebuild a real socialist perspective based on the self-activity and self-

organisation of the masses, and by doing that get rid of the state socialist illusion which has been an obstacle for decades to the emancipation of the workers. It is an illusion that gives free rein to "globalised capital", which continues to act ruthlessly, regardless of whether it is of the liberal or gangster variety.

It is a kind of conception that has all the defects of a static analysis. It is like a still photograph; it does not attempt to look for the origins of the present situation in the previous system and its dynamics. We have to ask ourselves whether the Soviet state and others of the same type represent a kind of barrier to capitalism, or whether the system was capitalism's Trojan horse. The Platform of the Iranian comrades sheds some necessary light on the question: "The Russian revolution was more or less defeated by 1924; however, the victorious counter-revolution could not roll back the events to such a point as to revive capitalism. As a result it continued the collective exploitation of the proletariat under the name of socialism and planned economy. Thus, the period of transition, rather than moving towards socialism, got caught in a backward bureaucratic spiral which was, step by step, returning it to capitalism. Gradually material and financial incentives grew in production and eventually the conditions for the return of capitalism prevailed".

Direct democracy and the transition to socialism

The comrades' description of the statist fetish is clear, and it leads to a very important strategic conclusion for the revolutionary socialist programme: "The only guarantee in achieving this transition and reaching communist society lies in the political nature of the state. Precisely for this reason one cannot talk of a transitional society when this power has been taken away from the proletariat. Such a society can only return to capitalism." And: "What guarantees this transition is not the percentage of state ownership but the rule of the organ for the self-government of the producers, i.e. the soviets."

The Platform defines the conditions which would guarantee the revolutionary socialist nature of the state: in the political sphere forms of the direct democracy of the masses will predominate, and this itself supposes that many parties will exist; in the socio-economic sphere a development of socialisation means that the workers themselves will control the process of production. Nationalisation is only a means to this end, one that is almost certain to be necessary, but it does not guarantee anything. The "semi-state" of the workers will wither away as soon as it is set up: it will be a step towards the extinction of all social classes and the end of oppression – two conditions which are to a large extent interdependent: "During the period of transition, state ownership must gradually and consciously move towards social ownership. The level of this growth is directly related to the level of democracy in the councils. Without the widest democratic rights in the councils state ownership will not only fail to show any signs of

transition to socialism but it will strengthen a collective bureaucracy". If we add a third condition to these two (and one that is not ignored by the Platform), it is the extension of the revolution, an indispensable factor as socialism can only be built internationally.

It is important to stress that these observations are not the result of pure abstract and deduction, but that they are rooted in the experience of the workers' movement, especially the experience of the Russian revolution, the only socialist attempt that was consciously revolutionary. For a short time in the twentieth century it was victorious. The effects of its degeneration still influence the whole world, especially the workers' movement. The causes of its degeneration were both objective and subjective; the result of its degeneration is that things that appeared to be near at hand, as the Platform explains so correctly, disappeared in the end and turned into their opposites.

First came a defeat; then the wave of revolutionary socialism rolled back in Europe; the organs of direct democracy were extinguished, together with the multi-party system; bureaucratic control of the economy grew stronger, to the detriment of direct workers' control; the state apparatus became stronger instead of withering away. [1]

The Iranian comrades insist correctly that "the socialist individuals will not come about by force" and stress the necessity of developing a political democracy in the transitional society, which must be deeper and more extensive than anything that could possibly exist under capitalism.

When they mention the need for "other democratic elected organs representing other sections and layers of the society alongside the workers' soviets" they evoke "one solution [which] might be the creation of an elected parliament". This, as the comrades themselves recognise, is a complex problem which has given rise to a number of arguments in the revolutionary socialist movement, especially about Rosa Luxemburg's line on the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly by the soviet power after the revolution of October 1917. Another contribution to the discussion of the Platform offers a methodological framework for finding an answer: "To propose representative bodies of a parliamentary type suggests prior consideration of the problems of political delegation and of the effective participation of the masses in 'a new form of democracy'. The socialist transition cannot be separated from the widening of democracy at the lowest level; direct democracy; the predominance of social over political issues; and the disappearance or progressive removal of the state." [2]

We can never lose sight of the fact that parliamentarianism constitutes one of the most successful forms of the delegation of power, and that makes it a powerful factor for the existence of a political bureaucracy; in the political sphere it is responsible for the reproduction of relationships of control. If you can imagine that parliamentary forms will still exist in the

transitional society, a problem follows automatically: how are you going to establish mechanisms of control and recall over parliament? Because these are the forms that direct democracy requires within representative democracy.

There is also the matter of central organs of power, whether we call them soviets or councils; such a body has the immense advantage over a parliament of resting upon institutions which at all times involve all producers and consumers in taking decisions. "Democracy of a new type" is not a mere phrase. It expresses very concretely that although socialist democracy, the democracy of the period of transition, contains within itself the gains of bourgeois democracy such as freedom of the press, of organisation, of free speech, and the right to vote, it is radically different from bourgeois democracy: socialist democracy signifies a breach in the pattern of existing democracy.

Democracy, dictatorship and freedom

The Platform indicates the place of democracy in the socialist transition as follows: "Democracy and socialism are not two separate phenomena where the first is merely a means of achieving the second (a means that can sometimes be set aside). For workers and toilers, democracy means securing the right to self-determination in all areas of social life, including the economic arena. Therefore the struggle for this form of democracy cannot be victorious before abolishing classes (in other words, prior to socialism). For Marx, the struggle for socialism without fighting for democracy is meaningless. For us socialism means the democratic organisation of society."

But democracy of a new kind, however much wider and more participatory it may be than the democracy of bourgeois parliamentary regimes, still means the exercise of a "dictatorship", the "revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat", according to Marx. The Platform rightly emphasises that the dictatorship has a content that is essentially social: "This dictatorship does not imply a despotic form of government, but a necessary phase to allow the working class to establish its rule and start the transition period through the abolition of private property".

The very fact that private property will be democratically expropriated and prohibited is itself coercive: it is a "dictatorial" measure against the bourgeoisie! That is what Marx's original concept meant; it had nothing to do with the phrase "dictatorship of the proletariat" as appropriated to itself by the Stalinist bureaucracy in its attempt to legitimise its aims – even though the bureaucrats were careful to stick the word "revolutionary" in front.

It is not just a matter of words which may have been wrongly employed from the very beginning, or which may have been misappropriated. The expression "the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat" may have

become filled with a particular content that makes it difficult to use outside a theoretical debate, but all the great revolutionary socialist leaders used "democracy" and "dictatorship" simultaneously. The general idea contained in the phrase is vital for our understanding of democracy and dictatorship. For Rosa Luxemburg the dictatorship had to be the means of applying democracy, while Lenin never had any hesitation in using the phrase "democratic dictatorship". Although the two words, democracy and dictatorship, are complete opposites in meaning they are far from being, as common sense imagines, incompatible. Democracy is the participation of everybody in collective decisions. By definition that implies a type of constraint: the minority is generally invited to accept the decision of the majority. This problem appears not only in bourgeois society, but in every institution whether it is a party, or the state, or an action by the exploited class. In every strike, for example, there is a problem of democracy: there is a centralising tendency, in the form of the mass meeting, the strike committee, and the necessary unity of the workers; there is an opposite tendency which we might call libertarian. This means, should you allow an individual worker, or a group of workers, the right not to go on strike when the majority, or even the most active and conscious minority, has decided to take strike action?

Obviously, there is no one correct answer that invariably fits all circumstances; only real life, which means your concrete experience in each individual situation, allows you to work out your answer.

Istvan Meszaros, in his book *Beyond Capital*, quotes Marx in *The German Ideology*, emphasising that the class (any class) "in its turn assumes an independent existence as against the individuals", the members of the class, and thus exercises its control over them. "Discussions of Marx's theory as a rule neglect this aspect, and concentrate on what he says about emancipating the proletariat from the bourgeoisie. But what would be the point of this emancipation if the individuals who constitute the proletariat remain dominated by the proletariat as a class?". [3]

This form of "dictatorship" exists in capitalist society; it becomes more acute for individual members of the working class in the society in transition to socialism, precisely because it is their own class which has achieved power. Bringing about socialism implies that all classes will be abolished, including the working class itself; it implies that there will be a conscious fight against control by a class. The history of the Russian revolution from 1917 to 1921 illustrates the contradiction. This period abounds with examples of opposition between the central state and collectives of workers, on a strictly political as well as on a socio-economic level. In December 1917 a discussion began (it was pursued in different ways afterwards) between partisans of workers' management and partisans of forms of centralised control; and those who won the argument were those who recommended concentrating powers of decision making into the hands of the central organs of

the "workers' state". However much you want it to be the main issue, and however consistent you are, democracy is far from being able to resolve the problems relating to methods of organisation and the struggle of the workers, nor, the day after the revolution, to the problems of building socialism.

What can you do with people who do not agree with you, those who by definition are always the minority? Democracy is not the same as freedom. Freedom means that you have full and complete exercise of your individual decisions. Because democracy is not enough, it is necessary to reduce and limit the inevitable elements of authoritarianism which exist at the centre of the various institutions which belong to the workers in the course of their struggle, and to associate elements of freedom both with democracy and with the essential solidarity of the working class. There can only be harmful consequences for both elements if we confuse democracy with freedom. An operation that is collective and "democratic" can perfectly adapt to a form of oppression of minorities, just as the uncontrolled freedom of the individual can repudiate both organisation and democracy.

The Platform suggests that "socialism" and "communism" mean the same: "a democratic organisation of society". This seems to be a source of confusion. In his famous phrase in the Communist Manifesto, Marx defined communism as "an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all". That is, communism is the reign of freedom of the social individual, which from henceforward will be in a position to develop to its fullest extent because there will be no more exploitation and oppression. If Marx had conceived of communism as the reign of democracy and organisation he would have said exactly the opposite of what he did say: the free development of all as a condition of the free development of each.

To some extent it is Stalinist ideology that has reversed the terms of Marx's proposition while it developed its own conception according to which the "socialist order" would guarantee the emancipation of humanity.

Some leaders of Trotskyist organisations have in their turn copied the Stalinists and put forward an ideology of "collectivism" which they counterpose to "individualism". This ideology, above all, has served to justify the internal regimes of these organisations, the characteristic of which is that they exercise tight control over their members. This vision of socialism based on order and discipline, of levelling out all differences other than social ones, is a world away from the concept of Marx and his real partisans.

Our main difference with the anarchists was on the forms and functions of the organisation, in addition to our difference over the conditions under which the state would disappear in the course of the process that led to socialism. There was no difference about the object to be attained. Far from putting some kind of "democratic

state" in place, the transition to socialism implies the complete withering away of the state – which itself, by definition, is the instrument of a class and therefore of oppression. Socialism means the end of democracy in every form that has been understood up to the present day, including political democracy, as that will no longer be a sphere of activity in itself, separate from other human activities.

The revolutionary vanguard party

The "betrayals" of the social democratic and Stalinist parties have their effect today. The evidence is there in people's consciousness; it exists in the form of the phraseology of the Stalinist imposture and its consequences. It does not exist only among the Stalinists: there are revolutionary and Trotskyist organisations that reproduce a whole series of bureaucratic mechanisms. The effect today is that many militant workers and youth, leaders of the class struggle, reject the very idea of a revolutionary vanguard party, and indeed any political party, as the instrument to emancipate those who are exploited. However, building such parties is indispensable, because no other kind of organisation can fulfil their function or even lay claim to carrying it out, especially not trade unions. The purpose of a union is to bring together workers whose class consciousness may be at the most elementary level of realising that it is necessary to defend their immediate interests that arise out of the process of exploitation.

The party is the only form of organisation that is capable of a global response; it embraces all those areas – social, economic, political, ideological, cultural and so on – where the class struggle takes place; it is the only form of organisation that can respond at the level of state power; the only form that can concentrate and synthesise all forms of power. As Pierre Naville said: "The party is the modern form of a voluntary association of people who aim to bring about a regime which they prefer ... it is the triumph of the ideological criterion in the institutional forms of social life". [4]

The Iranian comrades, for their part, have no doubt about this: in their Platform they point out that: "In order to achieve the transition to socialism there is a need for a socialist revolution and in order to lead the working class in this revolution there is a need for a revolutionary party. Therefore, the strategy of revolutionary socialism is the strategy of forming the revolutionary party". But what kind of revolutionary party is it? Who will join together to form it? Will it be a mass party or a "vanguard" party? The Platform replies that "the revolutionary party of the working class is in fact the vanguard workers' party. It is a party combining the revolutionary socialist programme and the vanguard layers of the workers' movement".

Carré Rouge No.7 contains two articles which quite rightly question the concept of the "self- vanguard"; although they begin with an assessment of the Organisation Communiste Internationaliste/Parti



Communiste Internationaliste they consider other Trotskyist organisations as well. [5]

The term “vanguard party” is not simply a phrase you are allowed to use to describe yourselves: it is a title that is won through the ability of a group of revolutionaries to enter deeply into the working class and to fuse with the most advanced sections of the class, in such a way that the party emerges out of the struggle. As the Platform says: “First and foremost it requires a revolutionary programme, a programme not as a souvenir from this or that world experience.... but a programme arisen from inside the specific class struggles... As long as the socialist programme is not closely tied up to the decisive sections of this vanguard, the proletarian party will not be built”.

Even if you dismiss the idea of the “self-proclaimed revolutionary vanguard” and call it a caricature, you still have to explain how it is that the revolutionary party which has to be built gathers together a vanguard and not the whole working class. Once again the Iranian comrades provide us with a reply when they indicate: “The dominant ideology is that of the ruling class, therefore up to the period of a revolutionary crisis, ie the eve of the overthrow of the bourgeois state, only a minority of workers will be attracted to a revolutionary socialist programme. ... The necessity for a vanguard party arises from the fact that the process of self-consciousness of the masses is not a linear and steadily ascending process”. In other words, there is only one way that the new party can form. It will be a minority party, as a vanguard of the proletariat, because of the very fact that there are extremely different levels of consciousness in the heart of the class, and from the fact that they tend to unite only in a revolutionary period.

Besides, if the level of consciousness was uniform, and if the class tended to unite at other than exceptional moments, the need for a party, or for several parties,

would never appear. The anarcho-syndicalists would have been right. The function of a party would have been fulfilled naturally by the mass organisations, that is, the unions. The very apposite remark by Naville that the party form represents “the triumph of the ideological criterion”, emphasises the vanguard character of the revolutionary party.

In practice, and in the conditions of class society, the idea of a party with the authority to unite the whole proletariat actually leads it, more or less inevitably, to reduce the ideological criterion to the level of a decorative extra. The “ideological criterion” is in fact the capability of the members of a party to control the way its perspectives on questions of theory, politics and programme are worked out. If this criterion is not central, the party-form will encourage the emergence of “specialists” who, unlike the mass of the members, “know” things; it will break up or prevent the formation of a “collective intellectual”; and it will favour the process of creating a bureaucracy – which is exactly what we wish to avoid. After all, history has given us enough material to reflect on what is meant by the phrase “serving the cause of Lenin”.

The facts show that the problem of building a revolutionary party is extremely complex; all the attempts which have been made up to now, including the one which appeared most conclusive, can only have been approximations. Even the initial success of the Bolshevik party was no guarantee against degeneration. The main contradiction is that although the vanguard party is forced to exist separately from the mass, it must always endeavour to make the separation less and do whatever it can so that the masses themselves may raise their own level of consciousness, become aware of their own self-determination, and abolish the necessity of a party for ever.

Leadership of organisations, or of the party, is similarly complex, and the same arguments apply. That is, comrades truly fulfil their roles as leaders to the extent that they contribute towards the best conditions for abolishing their leadership role. That is, they will bring forward other militants, as many as possible, to take their place. And if the party and its leaders do not have such a perspective there will exist all the inherent dangers of “mini-leaderships”, “mini-apparatuses” or “micro-bureaucracies”, all more or less self-proclaimed.

Nothing guarantees to protect a party from this kind of deviation. On the other hand means do exist, as the Platform itself mentions, to raise both the theoretical level and the ideological struggle, to create the closest liaison with the proletariat and completely interpenetrate with its real vanguard, those who are actually leading the struggles and mobilisation of the class. There is only one reason why a revolutionary party should exist, and that is the struggle for socialism. Rosa Luxemburg wrote: “The essence of socialist society consists in the great working mass ceasing to be led and on the contrary beginning to live all its active political and economic life for itself, to

determine its own existence, always more conscious and more free". [6]

That explains why in that same document when she emphasised that a vanguard party was necessary, or in what amounts to the same thing, how to avoid a drift to substitutionism, she proposed a synthesis which so far has not been equalled: "The Spartacist League is not a party which aims to establish its domination over the working masses, even if the working masses bring it to power; the only aim of the Spartacist League is to be at every moment that party of the proletariat which is most conscious of the common goal; that party which at each step along the road travelled by the broadest mass of the workers reminds it consciously of its historical tasks; whatever stage of the revolution has been reached, it stands for the final outcome, and in each local or national question, stands for whatever represents the interests of the world revolution of the proletariat". [7]

Experience and consciousness

The Iranian comrades' Platform is written within such a perspective. It defines the real activity and tasks of a party. But then it appears to depart from this perspective when it asserts that "the vanguard party is in fact the accumulated consciousness of the class" and, further on, that "the revolutionary socialist programme is no more than a concentrated generalisation of the experience of the vanguard (on the international scale)". This opens the door to conceptions of spontaneism, possibilism and workerism; in practice, if you disregard the nature of the party as a specific category, not identical to the workers' vanguard (the party is in no sense simply an "outpost" of the vanguard), it can lead you to underestimate a number of tasks which do not reveal themselves automatically or directly out of the experience that has been accumulated in struggle; this argument applies particularly to the development of theory. The assertion that "Marx did not make the workers' movement socialist, it was the working class that converted the liberal Marx to communism" can yield a one-sided interpretation. The connections between experience and consciousness, practice and theory, spontaneity and organisation, are eminently dialectical; these categories are always interconnected and unite in one single revolutionary activity: Marx was nourished by the theoretical and practical experience of the workers' movement (though not that alone) while at the same time he had begun to influence the movement both theoretically and practically. It is of course absolutely true that "Lenin and Trotsky did not put forward the idea of building workers' soviets, but with the establishment of such soviets by the workers themselves they realised the significance of such structures". It is not possible to forget that the actual activity of this workers' movement was determined to a large extent by the intervention of the revolutionary social democrats.

These comments in the document are the prelude to a serious attack on "intellectuals". The Platform asserts that the term "intellectual" itself "has lost the

significance it may have had in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and is today merely an excuse for power-seeking petty bourgeois elements wishing to sound off inside the communist movement". Perhaps this "charge" can be explained by their unfortunate experiences in the Iranian left, but it is not justified at all in the light of the general experience of the workers' movement. It is not true that "from this layer the most important sections of the bureaucracy arise".

In the bureaucratic states the apparatchiks are recruited from various social classes, including the working class (especially, in the early days of the USSR, principally from the working class). They then lifted themselves above the class. And if you had to characterise their intellectual level from the very beginning, you would be forced to point out their absolute mediocrity.

On the contrary it is necessary today to restate the importance of developing theory, bound up of course with a political practice. We are faced with the globalisation of capital, the collapse of the eastern bloc, and the collapse of Stalinism, all at the same time. On a world scale we have entered a new period that poses new and more complex tasks and problems to revolutionary Marxists. From this point of view it is more than ever necessary that "intellectuals", or whatever you want to call them, place their abilities at the service of the proletariat – and the fight to reopen the socialist perspective. Besides, the Iranian comrades themselves, especially in this document, have done intellectual work by posing a series of essential questions and beginning to give answers to them.

About "democratic centralism"

The Platform notes: "Perhaps no issue has been as important a cause of engulfing the Iranian left in the dreadful internal spirals of organisational bureaucracy as the notion of "democratic centralism". It appears to be an experience shared both widely and internationally. Francois Chesnais was completely right when he wrote in Carré Rouge: "For at least forty years democratic centralism has been the instrument that allowed weak or dishonest leaderships to appeal to the principle of authority rather than allowing their members freedom of political thought and action". [8]

This point needs careful critical examination. Weak or dishonest leaderships have the habit of introducing democratic centralism as an inviolable "principle". We are obliged by necessity to question seriously the origins of the concept, and examine in detail how it has been applied in its lifetime.

We can say, first of all, that the idea reflects something real, something necessary. Every revolutionary organisation must be democratic, because it consists of a group of rebels who are fighting the power of the bourgeoisie or the bureaucracy, because democracy is the condition for working out the best political responses, and because the organisation must prefigure

socialist relations to some extent in the way it works. At the same time it must be centralised in action because the bourgeoisie (or the bureaucracy) are always highly centralised.

Democratic centralism is like an algebraic formula that unites two contradictory elements, but it means no more than that the party must be as co-ordinated as possible and at the same time as democratic as possible. "Democratic" means that each member or group of members must have the right to participate in working out decisions and of explaining all their positions and disagreements with the leadership. It even means (and the concrete example of the Bolshevik party demonstrates this point, at the times when it was carried along by the democratic flood of the working class and by society in general) the freedom not to follow its own decisions and even to dissociate themselves publicly from them.

It is necessary to add that the level of democracy, and the degree of centralism, must vary from situation to situation. In a country which suffers from more or less severe police and state repression, democracy and liberty will necessarily be constrained.

For instance, if the party has been forced underground, how can it hold a congress in the best conditions for democracy? What if its members are in jail or have been tortured or assassinated? But in a country like France, where there is almost complete bourgeois democratic freedom for the workers' movement to operate, democracy must be absolute, the freedom of each member or group of members being limited only by the obvious need of making their actions correspond to the common aim of the party. In 1906, that is, at one of the times when the Russian revolutionary Marxists enjoyed democratic freedom and had been able to cease operating clandestinely, Lenin defended "complete freedom of criticism". He meant in public, either in the party press or elsewhere; the only restriction was not to "destroy or hinder the unity of any given action determined by the party". [9]

To put it another way: the only limitation on members' democratic rights, on freedom of expression or on interventions in the class was determined in the last analysis by the programme they had jointly agreed – what Trotsky called a "common understanding of events and tasks". In the conditions we know here, the restrictions on democracy and open expression sometimes imposed in the name of security or even of semi-clandestinity are merely means of coercion. After all, everybody knows who the members of the party are, where they work and where they live (if not, they could not function as party militants); and they know that the state apparatus has ultra-sophisticated means of technological surveillance. No, the purpose of these restrictions on democracy can only be means of coercion, to keep people isolated from each other and to neutralise the members; the leadership, copying the mechanisms of the bureaucracy, use them for their own

benefit, even if it only means that they continue as the leadership.

The Platform of the Iranian comrades puts forward the principle of enlarging to the utmost the rights and guarantees of democracy, especially as it affects the rights of tendencies and factions. It is a positive, and certainly an appropriate, response. However, experience shows that it is not enough to regulate the actual relationships between members within the party. There are numerous aspects of the problem that we still have to study and discuss. There is a particular problem which concerns a kind of federalism, that is, autonomy in making decisions at local level, at least on matters for which local leaders are responsible. Another problem concerns the right of public disagreement and the right to test out perspectives which are different from those of the majority. Yet another concerns the party apparatus, the "full-timers", and how they can be controlled. And the problem of problems is how you can hold fast to what your organisation should really become, which means that as far as possible the party should be the property of the membership.

The specific meaning of this last statement is that information must circulate in all directions; that working out political perspectives is not the monopoly of a few; that the politics of a party that is being formed must allow each member to develop to the greatest extent that they are capable of; and that their leaders should be under the control of the membership.

The reason for making this point is that in most cases what actually happens in parties is the opposite; the leadership controls the members very closely; the only effective rights the members have is to elect a leadership when a congress is held. In short, it means that we must introduce important elements of direct democracy into the revolutionary vanguard organisation.

Notes

1. See articles in *Carré Rouge* Nos. 6 and 7 "Rediscovering the lessons of the October revolution" and "The Black Book of Communism, a prophylactic in the ideological war".
2. "Some notes towards a discussion" by Aldo Andres Romero and Roberto Ramirez, in *Debates*, the discussion journal published by the MAS of Argentina.
3. "Beyond Capital", Merlin Press, London and New York, 1995 pp. 908-909.
4. "The New Leviathan" Vol. 5, p.349, *Anthropos*, 1972.
5. "We need another type of discussion!" by Francois Chesnais, and "Why is it so difficult for us to draw 'some lessons from our history'?" by Benoit Mesly.
6. "What does the Spartacist League want?" in *Spartacus and the Berlin Commune*, Spartacus Publications 1977, p91.
7. *Idem* p 97.
8. *Op cit* *Carre Rouge* No. 7
9. "Freedom of criticism and unity in action", Lenin, *Collected Works* vol. 10 p. 467 (French edition).