WHAT IS DEMOCRATIC CENTRALISM?

The traditional conception of democratic centralism has meant the subordination of minorities to the majority opinion within a revolutionary party. The major reason for this understanding was related to the ability of the party to act as an efficient and effective organisation. However, it has become apparent in relation to the experience of many Marxist parties that this situation has often led to dissent, and ultimately the creation of new organisations because they could not accept the political situation created by majority domination. Thus it is apparent that in order to try and resolve this problem it is necessary to allow for the maximum possibility of discussion, and the connected ability to act in accordance with freedom of individual conscience. It is no longer sufficient to utilise the rule of the majority in a manner which effectively silences the opinions of the minority. The minority should have the individual freedom to continue to advocate their views even after a decision has been taken. This does not mean they have the right to oppose the practical implications of any resolution taken, but it does suggest that their views have not been silenced.

The above view is based on the ability to form factions within the party in order to promote a particular position, or present a more comprehensive programme. Unfortunately the conception of democratic centralism has been historically distorted by the approach of the 1921 Bolshevik tenth party congress which banned factions in the name of party unity. It was argued: “All class conscious workers must clearly realise that factionalism of any kind is harmful and impermissible, for no matter how members of individual groups may desire to safeguard party unity, factionalism in practice inevitably leads to the weakening of team-work and to intensified and repeated attempts by the enemies of the governing party, who have wormed their way into it, to widen the cleavage and to use it for counter-revolutionary purposes.”(1) This precedent about how to conduct party relations within a revolutionary organisation has often meant that the opposition group is defined as an expression of reactionary petty-bourgeois or bourgeois trends. For example, the Shachtman led opposition within the American SWP in 1939-40. The inevitable result is the expulsion of the minority in order to maintain political and ideological unanimity. What is not accepted is that the minority may be raising important questions about the policies of the majority. For example, the Workers Opposition in 1921 was questioning the effective rejection of 'socialism from below' by the party majority, whilst the Shachtman group was making principled points concerning the contradictions in Trotsky understanding of the degenerated workers state. However, in both instances, the assumption of 'bad faith' on part of the minority meant that expulsion was the logical result.

In relation to the situation in 1921, Lenin could not accept that the issues had been clarified, and therefore recognition that political understanding had been improved by the factional role of the Workers Opposition was rejected. Instead he argued that the only outcome of factional dispute was for the opponents of the revolution to increase their influence. He suggested that the influence of factions within the Bolshevik party had encouraged the development of the Kronstadt sailors mutiny, and he argued: “In this question, propaganda should consist on the one hand, in a comprehensive explanation of the harmfulness and danger of factionalism from the standpoint of party unity and of achieving unanimity of will among the vanguard of the proletariat as the fundamental condition for the success of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and on the other hand, in an explanation of the peculiar features of the latest tactical devices of the enemies of Soviet power. These enemies, having realised the hopelessness of counter-revolution under an openly white guard flag, are now doing their utmost to utilise the disagreements within the Russian Communist party and to further the counter-revolution in one way or another by transferring power to a political group which is outwardly closest to recognition of the Soviet power.”(2)

This view implies that the actual arguments of the Workers Opposition in favour of workers control of production and 'socialism from below' do not matter. Instead what is important is that the very controversy created by the political dispute within the party can only be advantageous for the reactionary opposition to the Soviet regime. It is not accepted that this opposition within the party could actually be enhancing the capacity to promote the cause of socialism. Instead the very fact of dissent can only be to the advantage of reaction, because only the party leadership is the expression of the cause of socialism. Hence, by definition the opposition must have an anti-socialist logic regardless of the motivations of its proponents. This standpoint has been utilised countless times to uphold organisational and political monolithic unity within so-called revolutionary parties. This defence of rigid conformity has been based on the situation of intellectual intolerance and the rejection of any merit in the dissenting views of the minority. The result is the minority has to label the majority as opportunist and so they leave the organisation, if they are not expelled.

It could be argued that the above is a recipe for rotten liberalism, and the toleration of majorities or minorities that are opportunist. This contention could be true if reality was simple and not complex. For example, was it opportunist to define the Eastern European states after the Second World War as deformed workers states or as state capitalist? The point is that this issue caused endless grounds for controversy and disputes because nobody could agree about what was explanatory. The point is that nobody did adequate work on Soviet political economy which could outline the character of this formation, and therefore promote the most plausible and credible view of the post-war developments. Hence given the complexity of the Soviet social formation it was not opportunist to define the USSR as either a degenerated workers state, bureaucratic collectivist, or state capitalist. What was obviously opportunist was Pablo's perspective of war revolution led by Stalinism. However, the opposition to Pablo was fragmented into rival groups, and the Pabloite faction became the majority of the Fourth International. This situation deteriorated further because the American SWP, instead of defining Cuba as a society in terms of structural assimilation with the USSR, reunited with the Pabloites on the basis that Cuba was not a deformed workers state.

The opposition to this Pabloite approach could have united, which was the forces of the International Committee plus the supporters of the state capitalist approach and bureaucratic collectivism. Instead of this natural unity, there was an increasing process of fragmentation. The situation was characterised by constant splits. Only the definitive centrist United Secretariat maintained organisational and political unity because of the acceptance of the role of factions. What resulted was the development of national based organisations, which could only maintain unity on the basis of the most authoritarian application of democratic centralism. The result of this situation was that the very credibility of revolutionary Marxism has been called into question. In order to re-establish Marxist parties it is necessary to address the issue of how to promote working class unity in the age of globalisation, and what is a credible version of the aim of socialism? This work has to occur alongside the creation of an action programme or strategy of class struggle.

In other words, all tendencies claiming to be revolutionary Marxist have historically failed. The task is to create a united world party on the basis of a principled programme that upholds the importance of class struggle if socialism is to be achieved. In this context the application of rigid democratic centralism would be counter-productive. Instead we need maximum and open discussion about how to re-connect the role of the Marxist party with what has often become a demoralised and dis-organised working class. In this situation the role of organisation must be subordinated to theoretical creativity. The goal should be to promote theory in order to assist the process of resolving important practical aims. Historically the question of the character of Stalinism divided revolutionary Marxism. The demise of Stalinism means that this is no longer an issue. However, we have to work out a principled approach towards Social Democracy and the Trade Unions. It should be possible to carry out these tasks within a single organisation. Only the legacies of the party histories of the past continue to divide us. But we should attempt to overcome this division and instead recognise that a united organisation would immensely advance the task of developing a party to promote class struggle to overcome capitalism and bring about human liberation.

However, a basic question would instantly arise? What would be the organisational character of the future united Party? Firstly, it would have to be based on the importance of factions in order to enhance the process of democratic discussion about theory and policy. But, primarily individuals would be encouraged in order to make their valuable contributions to theory, and nobody would be ridiculed about the quality of their contribution. Instead criticism would be constructive and aim to improve the original output. Secondly, the leadership would not be permanent and instead subject to a regular process of re-election and the right of re-call. The problem of authoritarian leadership has been related to its longevity, and this issue can be tackled by the regular – possibly bi-yearly - replacement of the existing leadership. Thirdly, the right to act in accordance with individual conscience. The party would still act on the basis of majority voting, but individuals would have the right to exempt themselves from actions because of the right of conscience. However, they could not 'disrupt' the practical policies decided by the party.

The most problematical and illusory view of the present is that a mythical Lenin, and connected organisation, will emerge out of the present collection of parties in order to become the exclusive and definitive expression of a revolutionary process. This prospect is unlikely to happen. People will still wonder why there are so many competing organisations. Instead of aspiring to be the next Bolsheviks we should encourage the development of the unification of the many diverse groups. This process should be encouraged both in national and international terms. In this manner we should reject the view that what could be defined as centrist groups should be denied admission into the party. Instead only organisations which are openly reformist, and favour accommodation with capitalism, should be denied entry into the world party of socialism. Indeed it is unlikely that Social Democratic formations would attempt to join a party of proletarian revolution. However the world party should be open to the many organisations with a diverse and antagonistic history that still claim to be revolutionary Marxist. (The question of the admission of Anarchists must be subject to a vote, but it has to be remembered that Anarchist reject the Commune state of Marxism and so differ with regards to principal objectives) This process of unification will be difficult but it is still an aim that is preferable to the impotent fragmentation of the present. The united revolutionary party is vital for the task of world socialist revolution.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)Lenin: Preliminary Draft Resolution on Party Unity (Tenth Part Congress) Collected Works Volume 32 p241

(2) ibid p242

APPENDIX: DO WE CALL FOR THE FIFTH INTERNATIONAL?

Groups like the Red Flag call for a new fifth international. This indicates that they want to build an exclusive new International based on their leadership. This demand rejects the participation within their ranks of the many organisations that still uphold the aim of developing a principled form of the Fourth International. We should attempt to create unity between the many different organisations in terms of aiming to create a new international without numbers. It will be the perfect right of the groups within this organisation to continue to define themselves by their number of preference. The point is that despite the many different traditions within the new international organisation we should be united by a practical action programme and commitment to the class struggle. Each effective faction will be able to present its particular policies for consideration by the international. In a sense this process will be a return to the traditions of the First International in which policy was based on the process of consultation of many different tendencies. However, it would be a nostalgic mistake to also call the International a re-make of the First. This is because it is an illusion to think that we could re-create the First International by effectively dis-regarding the lessons, strengths, and weaknesses of the other Internationals. Primarily, we would wish to associate ourselves with the Fourth International despite its turbulent and often ineffective history, because of the valuable role it had in continuing the principles of revolutionary Marxism despite the pressures of Stalinism. Consequently, in a neutral manner it would be more flexible and principled to suggest that we are for a New International. This international would be based on the best traditions of all previous internationals, and yet would be effectively declaring that we aim to overcome the limitations of the past by creating a principled organisation for the present. Within this new international it would be perfectly acceptable to define ourselves as a Fourth, or Fifth internationalist tendency. It would also be possible to change the name of the international by means of a majority democratic vote.

WHAT WOULD BE THE PROGRAMME OF ACTION OF THE NEW INTERNATIONAL?

Our starting point would be:

(1)The aim of international proletarian revolution. This can be geographically defined as the perspective of the United Socialist states of Europe, or of Latin America, Africa, and so on.

(2)Promotion of a socialist economy based on workers control of production and a democratic plan.

(3)The struggle to overcome all discrimination based on gender, sexual orientation, and religious faith. Opposition to racism and fascism.

(4)Theoretical work to understand the latest forms of imperialism in terms of the role of globalisation and neo-liberalism.

(5)Support for all struggles to improve the conditions of the working class and oppressed under capitalism, and for reforms that enhance the possibilities for the revolutionary transformation of society.

(6)Promotion of national self-determination when it upholds the principle of the international unity of the working class. This means opposing the formation of nations based on the domination of privileged areas and systematic repression of minorities.

(7)Defence of democracy, and opposition to the single party state under conditions of capitalism or so-called socialism.

(8)Support for rank and file control of trade unions, and promotion of the role of the trade unions in the task of overthrowing capitalism.

(9)The formation of workers councils, or Soviets, in order to express the popular development of the revolutionary process.

(10)For a world based on peace, socialism and international co-operation. An end to war and conflict.