

POLEMIC

Don't revive absurd slogans

Jack Conrad has explained his own political viewpoint in his essays in the *Weekly Worker* on Lenin and the dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry.

In so doing he has entered a minefield. I do not aspire to be a Lenin (or a Marx) scholar, but I do know that there were five editions of Lenin's works and only the first two can be considered reliable. The fourth edition, which was produced with Stalin's approval, is considered of particularly dubious worth. For that reason a fifth edition was produced under Khrushchev. However, much of the English editions of Lenin's works are from the fourth edition. Apart from Stalinist alteration of Lenin's writing, the actual translations can often be poor, to the point of producing a meaning, in English, which is the direct opposite of the Russian.

There may also have been writings of Lenin which have been destroyed and remain unknown. (That Stalin was capable of gross deception was brought out when he invented a meeting of a military committee of the party on October 14 1917 where he was present and Trotsky was not. Needless to say, the dreamed up minutes of that meeting showed that he and not Trotsky was crucial to the revolution.) The protocols of the party congresses that were printed in the early 20s can be different from those that appeared under Khrushchev, which, for instance, excluded Lenin's speech at the 13th Conference of the party.

In a different way, one has to be very careful when trying to understand what Trotsky was saying at particular times. Trotsky felt impelled to concede to the cult of Lenin when making public comments, whether oral or written. For that reason, he appeared to criticise himself for not being an earlier Bolshevik. He made the absurd remark that we cannot be right against the party in the same way, though we can surmise that he was being ironical. Trotsky never agreed with Lenin's concept of the party, precisely because he regarded it as undemocratic. That is clear from his writing and I know that from other sources. One has to be very careful when quoting Trotsky to determine his real meaning and his real intention. Translations, even of Trotsky, are not always correct.

Jack Conrad is, therefore, wrong to assume that Trotsky actually thought that he wasted his time before 1917 and therefore that Lenin was the more serious before then. The idea does not bear examination. Trotsky was very active, in various bodies, as well as writing, studying, etc. Trotsky would not have played the role he did at Kienthal and Zimmerwald if that had not been the case. The direct building of the Bolshevik Party was not the only political requirement before 1917.

Similarly when Trotsky tries to glide over the real differences with Lenin in 1917, by arguing that Lenin had not fundamentally changed, he is ignoring reality. There had to be a frank discussion between Trotsky and the Mezhrainitsi in order for there to be a merger at all, and the concessions were not all made by the latter. Trotsky, for instance, asked Lenin, in these formal discussions, if he would give up his Russocentrism, for instance. The problem was not that Lenin believed in a revolution in one country, but that his concentration was on the Russian empire. In other words, there had to be more emphasis on the international and historic nature of the rev-

olution itself. I do not know Lenin's reply, but it is clear that there were real differences and they were discussed and worked over.

Trotsky's major mistake, which was entirely understandable, was that he underestimated Stalin, Stalinism and its consequences. We might speculate that it might have been better for us and history in general if Trotsky had said what he believed rather than conceding to the cult of Lenin. Trotsky's statements, therefore, have to be carefully considered when assessing the real differences with Lenin.

We cannot only go by what was said, given the nature of the time. We have also to look at what actually happened. The nature of the party changed radically from a vanguardist party, albeit already different from the 1902 version, to a mass, if leading, party of the proletariat. It had regular open debates in the most trying circumstances. Even the disloyalty and sabotage of Zinoviev and Kamenev were ignored and they continued to play crucial roles in the party, as did the dissident left communists like Bukharin, Preobrazhensky, etc, later. Contrast that with Lenin's expulsion of Bogdanov and his faction when they differed on the tactics of boycotting the duma, after 1906 - a much lesser 'crime' in less pressing circumstances than the ones cited. The fact is that the party leadership itself was now different and the structure of the party itself was changed, precisely because it was no longer Leninist in the old sense.

In 1917, as is very well known, but contested by Jack Conrad, Lenin changed his line and dropped the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry. The opposition of the party leaders at the time, including Stalin of course, was based on the years of maintaining that line. After three weeks they capitulated when Lenin threatened to leave the party and build a new one. That showed that Lenin was the party itself. If he left, the party would almost certainly have had to dissolve.

Jack Conrad has had to admit that, at the very least, the party leaders were not expecting Lenin to adopt the revolutionary line, which Trotsky had been advocating all along. In my view, Lenin never returned to that concept. He never again advocated it for any other country, although Stalin did, and for that matter so did Preobrazhensky when he capitulated to Stalin in 1928.

However, Jack Conrad is doing violence to reality when he argues that Lenin submitted himself to the democracy within the party. I attended meetings in the USSR, 40 years later, where there were formal proposals and real votes and I saw very clearly that people voted the way they were expected to vote. Lenin's theoretical and practical control over the party was such that he was never likely to lose, provided that he maintained his stance.

In any case, when the founder, theoretician, tactician and strategist of the party put forward a line, and then said he would leave unless he got his way, that in itself was an abuse of democracy. Democracy is not just formal voting. It requires a series of other conditions. A party which has voting for all posts, and all the other democratic conditions up to and including recall of delegates to its leading bodies, can



Vladimir Lenin: deified by Stalin

still be undemocratic in its essence. The 'infallible and permanent' leader does not even have to be on any body, provided that he enjoys sufficient respect, for whatever reason.

Jack Conrad does a heroic job of arguing for Lenin's continuity of line. Stalin's capitulation, which he cites, is no tribute to either Lenin or Stalin, but merely reflects Stalin's long-term subservience to Lenin. Jack Conrad ignores the fact that the Petrograd party held out as long as they could - until Lenin's ultimatum. He also ignores the very obvious difference between the original slogan of the dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry and the new formulation, later in 1917, of a dictatorship of the proletariat and the poorest peasantry. The addition of the word 'poorest' changes everything. The poorest were a small section of the peasantry, close to, if not identical to, the rural proletariat. Lenin had dropped, therefore, the whole concept of a democratic stage with the petty bourgeoisie implied in the original slogan.

Lenin was a politician in a way that Trotsky was not. Trotsky insisted on democratic forms - evidenced by his demand that the soviets take power rather than the Bolshevik Party, as Lenin wanted in early October 1917. Lenin, on the other hand, tried harder to find a way to get support among the majority of the population, as well as among the working class, for the struggle against the forms of exploitation and oppression that they suffered. That meant finding ways of conceding to the peasantry, and the national groups in the Russian empire. Trotsky was not against such concessions, but laid more stress on the dangers involved. Lenin was the better politician, while Trotsky turned out to be correct. Both agreed on dissolving the constituent assembly and both agreed on invading the Ukraine. Neither of those actions were democratic. Both agreed on the policy of militarising labour in 1920, a policy for which Trotsky has often been criticised.

Jack Conrad's implication that Lenin was democratic and Trotsky was not is simply absurd. Lenin's actions from the earliest years to the last showed that he had no time for democratic niceties when important questions were at stake. A number of examples have already been cited, but probably the most obvious two are the ban on factions and his intention to

dismiss Stalin. The latter showed that his attitude to democracy had its strength as well as its obvious weakness. Trotsky's conception of the party, as shown in 1904, was closer to that of Luxemburg and indeed of all traditional Marxists.

Strangely Jack Conrad does not explain what the dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry would be like. Would there be a constituent assembly or a democratically elected parliament? If so, in an overwhelmingly peasant country like Russia the left would be a minority - probably a small minority, as was the case in the constituent assembly in 1918. Would there be democratically elected soviets for both town and country? If so, the left would still have been a minority, perhaps larger than in the latter case, perhaps not. Would all landlords, the bourgeoisie plus medium to large farmers be excluded from voting? As the middle peasantry was a very substantial section of all peasants, the peasantry would have been effectively disfranchised.

The fact was (and is) that all peasants want more land in order to build up their small agricultural holdings as small businesses. They are orientated towards the market, not towards socialism. Only agricultural labourers and the poorest peasantry, who are threatened with proletarianisation, tend towards the left.

What kind of economy would there be? It would have to be capitalist, with high prices for agricultural goods, for the peasantry to support it. That would rule out industrialisation. Given the nature of Russia, the peasantry would have the whip hand, but it could only fail, as was shown in the disastrous Stalin-Bukharin policy of 1923-29. However you turn the idea around, there is no conceivable form in which it could have existed, even for the short time possibly required.

At the time when Lenin put forward this strange, contradictory slogan the peasantry were in revolution against the autocracy in 1905 and he conceived of an anti-absolutist alliance in order to overthrow the disintegrating system (or semi-Asiatic mode of production, as Plekhanov and Trotsky saw it). It had some credibility in that there was a *de facto* alliance and the workers were clearly the dominant force in demanding and achieving change. But an alliance, under the leadership of the workers, was one thing and an actual transitional form is quite another.

The slogan strikes me as one more of Lenin's attempts to get through to the non-socialist-supporting section of the population, but the whole idea is not just theoretically wrong: it sounds, and was shown to be, wildly impractical. Jack Conrad has to accept that the isolation of the Bolshevik Party in Russia, when the civil war was over, owed everything to the peasant rejection of the Communist Party.

The left has to continue the process of cleansing Marxism of its Stalinist distortions. Indeed if it does not do so it is doomed. The cult of Lenin is a feature alien to Marxism, invented by Stalin, as noted by Jack Conrad. Like all great men, Lenin's genius, which lay in his understanding of political power, had an obverse side. He built a party, which no one else was

capable of, but its members were not just subordinate to him: they were both inferior in ability and even servile. The merger with the Mezhrainitsi provided the necessary intellectuals who played absolutely crucial roles in the revolution.

It is hard to have anything but a measure of contempt for some of Lenin's subordinates. Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin, etc all showed themselves up as incapable of standing up to Stalin. There is no question that Lenin would have dismissed Stalin, had he not had a stroke in 1922, and history might have been very different. We have to ask, however, what kind of party it was that so easily obeyed its leader? In 1921, Lenin banned factions and Trotsky was not re-elected to the leading party bodies until Lenin appealed to the delegates to change their minds. The point, here, is that Stalin built the cult of Lenin who was always right, in all circumstances, but the nature of Lenin's party made that very easy, even if Lenin, himself, did not support such a cult. Lenin, however, failed to build a party which trained its personnel to stand up to him, and succeed him. Trotsky was absolutely crucial to the revolution, but always remained an outsider. Jack Conrad's very desperation to downgrade the role of Trotsky proves the point.

Such a party has the advantage of loyalty to its leader, but that can also be a disadvantage when its leader dies and the new leader is not chosen in terms of his/her knowledge and understanding of Marxism and ability to lead, but in terms of length of service and subservience to the previous leader.

Why does Jack Conrad want to resuscitate a slogan which Lenin dropped and indeed reversed? He does not need Lenin's imprimatur to sell the idea of democracy to the left. As I understand him, he is not arguing that we will have a two-stage change to socialism - first democracy and then socialism. Instead he seems to be arguing that we must talk of democracy rather than socialism because people understand that better and because the left has been undemocratic in the past.

However, he does not achieve that by talking of Lenin's slogan, precisely because it shows Lenin up as not only wrong, but, by a legitimate deduction from Jack Conrad's outline, also as a hypocrite. It is time to bury the cult of Lenin, together with his body. Lenin was a great revolutionary leader, but like all such leaders he made his mistakes, and his miscalculations. It is our duty to work out his real legacy and his real partnership and differences with Trotsky.

Above all, Jack Conrad must know that Stalin and the Stalinists used the concept of a two-stage revolution to avoid any revolution over the world and they justified that by citing the slogan of the 'democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry'. Indeed Preobrazhensky, when he broke with Trotsky, cited it to support Stalin's disastrous policy in China. The whole matter would be academic if not for this crucial aspect of modern left politics, which is still continuing to support third world nationalism and first world stageism.

I should like to make a final plea. We do not need to appeal to history to justify our contemporary politics. That ought to be done on its merits. We have to learn from history - but that is another matter ●