

Introducing 1917

The Necessity of Revolutionary Organization

“The whole history of the struggle between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks is dotted with this little word ‘process.’ Lenin always formulated tasks and proposed corresponding methods. The Mensheviks agreed with the same ‘aims’ by and large, but left their realization to the historic process. There is nothing new under the sun.”

—Leon Trotsky, “To Comrade Sneevliet on the IAG Conference,” *Writings* (1934-35)

This is the first issue of *1917*, the political journal of the Bolshevik Tendency. We take our name from Year One of the proletarian revolution, the year the Russian working class smashed the chain of world imperialism at its weakest link. The October Revolution was not primarily a Russian event in its significance—it was the beginning of the international struggle for power by the proletariat.

The bright promise of the early years of the revolution has been dimmed by six decades of Stalinist treachery and betrayal. Today the Kremlin is no longer the headquarters of the proletarian revolution but the domain of a nationalist bureaucratic stratum which is a roadblock to socialism and which must be overthrown through workers political revolution. Nonetheless the lessons of the Russian Revolution retain all their significance for the revolutionary future of the working class and the defense of the social gains of 1917 remains a litmus test for demarcating authentic revolutionaries from the assorted social democrats of the “Third Camp.”

We are partisans of 1917. We base ourselves on the program and strategy of the leadership of that revolution, Lenin and Trotsky. We stand on the documents of the first four congresses of the Communist International; on the struggle of the Left Opposition against the Stalinist political counterrevolution; on the founding documents of the Fourth International and the revolutionary traditions of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) led by James P. Cannon from the 1930s to the 1950s. The SWP leadership abandoned the struggle to build a Trotskyist vanguard in the early 1960s in favor of reliance on the objective process of history (personified, in the first instance, by Fidel Castro). The Revolutionary Tendency, the progenitor of the Spartacist League (SL) was born in the struggle against the liquidationist implications of the ersatz Castroism of the SWP majority. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s the programmatic heritage of Trotskyism was represented by the Spartacist tendency. This tradition we claim as our own.

The founders of the Bolshevik Tendency are, for the most part, veterans of the international Spartacist tendency (iSt) who were purged, along with dozens of other cadres, in the course of that organization’s transformation from a Trotskyist propaganda group to a pseudo-revolutionary obedience cult. Initially organized outside

the iSt as an “External Tendency,” we decided that given our formal programmatic similarity it was appropriate to reapply for membership in the Spartacist tendency. We did so with the declared intent of crystallizing an opposition to the organization’s accelerating political degeneration. The SL leadership (which at one point pretended to be interested in our reintegration) responded to our application with a barrage of slander and invective designed to slam the door shut once and for all. We have since succeeded in consolidating an organization which represents the continuity of the Trotskyist tradition which the SL had carried forward from the SWP two decades earlier.

The Spartacist League can no longer be considered, in any sense, a revolutionary organization. An early indication of the SL’s political break with its Trotskyist past was the leadership’s decision to rip up the group’s implantation in the industrial working class. It has been a wild ride since then. From apocalyptic proclamations of an incipient fascist coup in San Francisco in July 1984 to misogynist characterizations of black feminist opponents as “female doberman pinshcers in heat,” the SL is today one of the nuttier (and nastier) centrist outfits on the left. Theirs is a peculiar type of centrism—political banditry—in which the formal political positions of the group are subject to wild fluctuations according to the perceived exigencies of maintaining “the party” (in particular its organizational apparatus and other assets) and/or the whim of the “founder-leader,” Jim Robertson. One of the articles of faith required of all those who take up residence in “Jimstown” is the paranoid delusion that virtually every other tendency on the left is involved in a gigantic web of police-sponsored intrigue aimed at (what else?) the Spartacist League. This schema is referred to in *Workers Vanguard* as the “Big Lie Campaign” and it is used to “justify” SL exclusions and cop-baiting against its opponents on the left.

Program and Period

The current period in North America is characterized by a general rightward shift across the political spectrum and concomitant shrinking of the organized left. A wide variety of ostensibly “revolutionary” organizations, notably the once formidable Maoist currents, have simply closed up shop and gone out of business. Those which have survived, particularly among the ostensible Trotskyists, have shifted significantly to the right in search of a milieu within which to operate. This is perhaps most evident in the case of the adherents of Ernest Mandel’s “United Secretariat” of the Fourth International (USec). Fifteen years ago young Mandelites were running around Paris and London waving the flag of the Viet-

namese National Liberation Front and singing the praises of Ho Chi Minh. No more. In the past few years the USec has embraced every anti-communist mass movement from Ayatollah Khomeini's "Islamic Revolution" to Lech Walsea's capitalist-restorationist Solidarnosc. The Mandelites capped their orientation to social democracy with the formal adoption at their 1985 World Congress of "Socialist Democracy and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat" in which these illegitimate pretenders to the mantle of the Fourth International propound the "democratic socialism" of Karl Kautsky and the Second.

Revolutionists must take account of the political and social climate within which they exist. One must necessarily adapt the style of presentation to the existing level of class consciousness and experience of one's audience. But a revolutionary organization cannot adapt the *content* of its program without thereby ceasing to be revolutionary. The Marxian program represents the historic interests of the proletariat as a conscious factor in world politics—a "class for itself." As such it is necessarily counterposed to the existing, false consciousness of the class "in itself" in bourgeois society.

The Problem of Revisionism

1917 will be both partisan and polemical. A blunt knife draws no blood. To struggle for revolutionary Marxism in our time means above all to politically combat those fake-revolutionary formations which are the organizational embodiments of bourgeois ideology in the working class. The history of the Marxist movement is one of a continuing struggle against those currents, which, under the banner of "continuing," "deepening" or "extending" Marxism, attempt to corrode (or revise) the fundamental tenets of the revolutionary program.

"Revisionism" at bottom reflects the pressure of bourgeois society upon those who seek to change it. The common denominator of all such currents is the "pragmatic" resignation to the immutability of the world as it is. The form of the political accommodation proposed varies according to circumstance but in general revisionist tendencies add little that is new—rather they tend to resuscitate schemes and impulses long discredited by the historical experience of the proletariat.

Revisionism in the Marxist movement rarely appears full-blown under its own colors. Initially, at least, it expresses itself in the terminology of Marxism. Rosa Luxemburg commented on this phenomenon in a polemic ("Reform or Revolution") written almost ninety years ago:

"To expect an opposition against scientific socialism at its very beginning, to express itself clearly, fully, and to the last consequence on the subject of its real content; to expect it to deny openly and bluntly the theoretic basis of the social democracy [i.e., the Marxist movement]—would amount to underrating the power of scientific socialism. Today he who wants to pass as a socialist and at the same time would declare war on Marxian doctrine...must begin...by seeking in Marx's own teachings the points of support for an attack on the latter, while he represents this attack as a further development of Marxian doctrine."

Careful attention to questions of program and theory and the vigorous defense of the political acquisitions of

the past is neither an exercise in Talmudic scholasticism, nor a form of ancestor worship, as is often imagined by the smug and cynical proponents of "non-sectarianism." What may appear to the novice or dilettante as pointless hairsplitting over minute nuances of a position often represents profound differences in political appetite with enormous implications in the future. Politics is a field in which a difference of one percent will often prove decisive.

The 'Organizational Question'

From the origins of our tendency we have insisted that the organizational question is a political question of the first order for a revolutionary grouping. A revolutionary tendency need not always be correct—indeed it *cannot* always be correct—but it must always be correctible. Whether or not it is correctible is a function of the internal regime which prevails. This is not primarily a question of adherence to formulae but of the living reality of the internal life of the organization. James P. Cannon, the founding leader of American Trotskyism once observed that:

"It is perfectly possible for slick leaders to write ten constitutions guaranteeing freedom of criticism in a party and then create an atmosphere of moral terrorism whereby a young or inexperienced comrade doesn't want to open his mouth for fear he will be made a fool of, or sat on, or accused of some political deviation he doesn't have in his mind at all."

—*The Socialist Workers Party in World War II*

A vibrant and democratic internal political life in a revolutionary organization is not a desirable option but a vital necessity. It is simultaneously the only mechanism for the correction of errors by the leadership and the only framework within which revolutionary cadres can be created. Groupings like the SL of the late 1970s, in which the leadership is able to appropriate an effective monopoly of political expression internally, in the interests of "efficiency" (i.e., by short-circuiting the necessarily time-consuming and difficult process of settling political disputes through democratic internal struggle) prepare their own inevitable political degeneration.

The membership of a Leninist organization has the right to elect those individuals to positions of leadership in whom it has the most political confidence and to replace them as it sees fit. At the same time a revolutionary organization can only operate on the basis of strict centralization, with the leading bodies having full authority to determine the public political line of the organization as a whole and to direct the work of all subordinate party bodies as well as individual members. Protection of the right to dissent within the party (and particularly of the right of minorities to struggle to replace the leadership) and the political consciousness of the membership itself provide the only guarantees against the degeneration of the vanguard short of the victory of the proletarian revolution.

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The revolutionary vanguard is distinguished above all by the fact that it is the bearer of the historically derived programmatic knowledge necessary to advance

the struggle for workers power. This is not something which can be announced or proclaimed, it must be proven by the responses of the organization to the events of the class struggle. Centrists scoff at those who carefully check the historical record in evaluating an organization's revolutionary credentials. To them this is all so much "bookkeeping." But the best test of what an organization will do in the future is not what it promises today but rather what it did at critical junctures in the past.

The importance of a revolutionary organization in the workers movement in periods of ebb in the class struggle is primarily to serve as an ideological pole to which to recruit and train the cadres necessary to lead the inevitable struggles to come. A revolutionary vanguard cannot be improvised on the spur of the moment. It will not

emerge semi-spontaneously in the "process" of the class struggle. It must be forged in advance in political combat between revolutionary Marxism and the entire panopoly of working-class misleaderships from social democrats to fake-Trotskyists. It is to this struggle that *1917* is dedicated.

"The decisive element in every situation is the force, permanently organized and pre-ordered over a long period, which can be advanced when one judges that the situation is favourable (and it is favourable only to the extent to which such a force exists and is full of fighting ardour); therefore the essential task is that of paying systematic and patient attention to forming and developing this force, rendering it ever more homogeneous, compact, conscious of itself."

—Antonio Gramsci, "The Modern Prince"