

South African Menshevism

In every capitalist society on the planet the Moscow-loyal Communist parties parrot the same line: “now is not the time for socialism, first we need unity with the progressive capitalists.” South Africa is no exception. This class-collaborationist theory of a “two-stage” road to socialism is borrowed directly from the arsenal of Menshevism. In Russia in 1917 the Mensheviks argued that the working class was too small and isolated to take power into its own hands, and regarded the October Revolution as a colossal blunder. Here the Stalinists have a small difference with their Menshevik teachers. As bogus claimants to the mantle of October—in reality Stalinism is the product of the bureaucratic strangulation of Lenin’s Bolshevik Party—they feel they have to exempt the Russian Revolution from their otherwise universal formula.

Bolshevism was distinguished from Menshevism in 1917 by its dynamic and internationalist conception of the possibilities of social revolution. The Bolsheviks did not believe that workers power had to await the magic moment when the flaccid Russian bourgeoisie had accumulated sufficient capital to employ 51 percent of the population as wage slaves. The fact that in Russia in 1917 the proletariat made up less than 10 percent of the population was, for Lenin, no reason to support the rule of the “enlightened” capitalists. The Bolsheviks saw the seizure of power by the Russian workers as an opportunity to break the chain of imperialism at its weakest link and thereby give impetus to the international socialist revolution.

The South African Communist Party (SACP)’s calls for a two-stage revolution in P.W. Botha’s apartheid slave state can only be termed a grotesque caricature of the Menshevik strategy of alliance with (i.e., subordination to) the bourgeoisie. The Stalinists admit that it will be necessary to destroy the entire state machinery of white rule: the army, the police, the judiciary, etc. (Of course this doesn’t mean that the SACP and their allies in the African National Congress [ANC] may not go for some kind of partial franchise/coalition government sell-out in the future. It only means they consider that to come out for anything less than the total destruction of the apartheid state at this point would be to commit political suicide.)

The black working class in South Africa constitutes an absolute majority of the population. The Asian, Colored and African bourgeois and upper petty-bourgeois strata are an insignificant minority with neither real economic nor social power. The black petty bourgeoisie has demonstrated that in the main it is willing to follow the lead of the new independent unions in the struggle against the hated regime.

The SACP admits that the preconditions exist in South Africa for the construction of a collectivized economy. An article which appeared in the *African Communist*, the SACP’s theoretical organ, observed that “There is no doubting that the material prerequisites for socialism exist in South Africa: a certain level of industrialisation, socio-economic contradictions and the force to

carry out the revolution (the working class)” [reprinted in *International Viewpoint*, 30 September 1985].

Yet these South African Mensheviks insist that the central political task of the moment is to begin “consolidating the unity of all classes, strata and national groups among the oppressed Black majority.” For Stalinists, “consolidating” a bloc between the black toilers and their would-be bosses means limiting the anti-apartheid struggle to a program which guarantees the “non-monopoly” sectors of the bourgeoisie a rosy future for exploitation. The ANC’s Freedom Charter (which the SACP fulsomely endorses) is just such a program.

It would be naive to imagine that the “Freedom Charter” is a ruse for duping the gullible capitalists. The Stalinists have proven time and again their willingness to betray the interests of the workers on the altar of “all-class unity.” In the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s; in France, Italy and Greece after the Second World War; in Indonesia in 1965; in Chile in 1973 and in other instances too numerous to mention, the Stalinist strategy of subordinating the workers to their class enemy has spelled disaster for those who have followed it. To use Trotsky’s analogy, the popular front is a “bloc” between the capitalists and the workers in the same sense that a horseman is a “bloc” between a horse and a rider. In the SACP’s “first stage” revolution the workers are expected to run all the risks and do all the bleeding while their would-be masters stand by, waiting to reap the rewards.

But there are indications that a Zimbabwe-style “first stage” is not so appealing to a significant layer of the more politically sophisticated black trade unionists. Moses Mayekiso, secretary of the Metal and Allied Workers Union in the Transvaal, expressed this sentiment in a recent interview:

“The [ANC’s] Charter is a capitalist document. We need a workers’ charter that will say clearly who will control the farms, presently owned by the capitalists, who will control the factories, the mines and so on. There must be a change of the whole society.

“Through the shop steward councils people are opposed to this idea that there will be two stages towards liberation: that we must clean up capitalism first, then socialism. It’s a waste of time, a waste of energy and a waste of people’s blood.

“Apartheid is just an appendage, a branch of the whole thing—the tree of oppression of capitalism. Then if you chop the branch the tree will still grow. You have to chop the stem, straight, once and for all. South Africa’s economy is at an advanced stage, where the workers can take over and direct the whole thing.”

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The decisive contribution of Lenin to the victory of the Russian workers in 1917 was his adamant refusal to offer any political support to the popular front (i.e., multi-class) Kerensky government, the government of the “democratic revolution” of the Russian bourgeoisie. In this sense the South African revolution is indeed a revolution which, in the words of *Newsweek* correspondents Robert Cullen and Ray Wilkinson, “awaits its Lenin.” ■