

Workers Power on the Russian Question: Doubletalk in the 2¹/₂ Camp

The British centrists of Workers Power greeted the overturn of Ceausescu's regime in Romania with the enthusiastic declaration that: "a spectre is haunting the world's rulers. It is the spectre of workers' revolution and its decade has arrived" (*Workers Power*, January 1990). Revolutionaries have to be more sober in their judgments. The mass "pro-democracy" movements of Eastern Europe were soon dominated by a pro-capitalist intelligentsia, and their growth was paralleled by a wave of hyper-nationalism. The "spectre" turned out to be that of the restoration of the capitalist system of exploitation and misery—not a renewed impulse toward communism.

In this period of working-class retreat, the question of defense of collectivized property is posed with unprecedented urgency. The fruits of Stalinism's utopian goal of "peaceful coexistence" with imperialism are being gathered, as mass unemployment and cata-strophic declines in wages and living conditions devastate Eastern Europe, bringing a resurgence of racist and even fascist sentiment in their wake. The incapacity of the bureaucratic rulers of the deformed workers states to defend the collectivized property forms upon which their rule is based has been laid bare.

Today, as the Stalinists abandon any pretense of loyalty to the "socialism" they long claimed to be building, the program of Trotskyism stands as the undisputed heir to the political legacy of the Bolshevik Revolution. For over sixty years Trotskyists have insisted that the defense of the gains of 1917—the expropriation of private property and the creation of a planned, collectivized economy—is inextricably linked to the perspective of world revolution. This is what James Cannon meant when he said that the Russian question, the question of the defense of the existing bureaucratized workers states, was inseparable from the question of proletarian revolution in the future. And it is on this question that the claim of Workers Power (and its international co-thinkers in the League for a Revolutionary Communist International [LRCI]) to represent the revolutionary Trotskyist program is most clearly revealed as bankrupt.

Workers Power Arrives

In early 1980 Workers Power publicly renounced the third-campist "Neither Washington nor Moscow" position of Tony Cliff's Socialist Workers Party (SWP), out of which it had emerged in the mid-1970s. Rejecting the SWP's description of the USSR as "state capitalist," Workers Power announced that it now subscribed to Trotsky's analysis of the Soviet Union as a degenerated workers state, and that henceforth it would defend the USSR against capitalist restoration despite its bureaucratic deformations.

Workers Power's break with its past proved, however, to be only superficial. On all the central questions

of international class politics of the last decade, in which the defense of collectivized property was posed, Workers Power couldn't find its way to the proletarian side of the class line.

Workers Power's particular brand of centrist confusion crystallized around its response to the 1979 Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. This was for much of the Reagan decade an important dividing line between defencists and those who bent to the pressures of the imperialist war drive against the USSR. Revolutionaries defended the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, which bolstered the modernizing regime of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) and prevented the establishment of an American ally on the USSR's southern border. We took a side in this conflict, and called for the military victory of the Soviet army and the PDPA over the tribalist fanatics of the *mujahedeen*.

Workers Power responded by placing a bet both ways. It denounced the 1979 intervention and said that it was strategically in favor of Soviet withdrawal. However, at the same time, it suspended its call for withdrawal for "tactical" reasons.

The attraction of this double-edged position became clear when, later in the decade, a Soviet withdrawal became imminent. In 1988 Workers Power's Movement for a Revolutionary Communist International (the precursor to the LRCI) passed a resolution which, while omitting the need to defend the USSR, continued to "condemn the [1979] invasion as counter-revolutionary" (*Trotskyist International* No. 1, Summer 1988). At the same time, these centrists warned against any "treacherous withdrawal" by the USSR, which would confront "the Afghan left, workers and peasants with the imminent threat of a bloodbath at the hands of the reactionary forces."

Workers Power candidly admitted that the intervention they denounced had prevented just such a bloodbath, in the context of "an escalating civil war [in which] the disparate forces of Islamic and monarchist reaction threatened to completely destroy the weak and faction-ridden PDPA regime." What's more, these sophisticates of confusion demanded that the Soviet armed forces "provide the necessary troops, ammunition and economic aid to make land reform, industrialisation, literacy and the defeat of reaction really possible." In other words, they called for the extension of an intervention which they condemned as "counter-revolutionary"! Workers Power replaces Trotskyist analysis with simply damning the Stalinists if they do and damning them if they don't.

Solidarnosc: Going With the Flow

Polish Solidarnosc presented revolutionaries with an acid test. While it embraced millions of Polish workers,

Solidarnosc had a program that sought the reintroduction of capitalism. Deliberately closing their eyes to the openly reactionary politics of Lech Walesa and his cohorts, the fake left went with the flow and backed Solidarnosc all the way.

Revolutionaries assess political movements not on the basis of popularity, but chiefly according to their political program. Solidarnosc in its early stages was an indeterminate and contradictory movement, but this indeterminacy was resolved at its September 1981 Congress, where it adopted an unequivocal capitalist-restorationist program. Ostentatiously rejecting any mention of “socialism,” the Congress declared that it was “necessary to separate the apparatus of economic administration from political power” (see: *Solidarnosc: Acid Test for Trotskyists*). Solidarnosc openly advocated dismantling the mechanisms of central planning and the abolition of the state monopoly on foreign trade. When Jaruzelski’s crackdown came in December 1981, revolutionaries called for blocking militarily with the Stalinists against this capitalist-restorationist movement.

In its approach to Eastern Europe, Workers Power is guided by two things: anti-Stalinism and an affinity for mass movements. When the Stalinists and the capitalist-restorationists came to blows, Workers Power sided with the counterrevolution and climbed aboard the “Solidarity with Solidarity” bandwagon. Workers Power did not go so far as Ernest Mandel’s United Secretariat, which alibied Solidarnosc’s ties to the Pope, the IMF and the CIA by declaring that it had an objectively socialist “dynamic.” Workers Power was more critical of Solidarnosc’s reactionary leadership, but decided to back it anyway.

A July 1982 resolution listed the features of the “dominant tendencies” in Solidarnosc: “subordination to the Catholic hierarchy;” “illusions in the bankrupt policies of Polish nationalism;” a “programme for the Polish economy that could strengthen the forces of capitalist restoration;” and “crippling illusions in western imperialism” (*Trotskyist International* No. 4, Spring 1990). They were also openly critical of the reactionary nature of the much-vaunted “self-management” movement. According to Workers Power and its co-thinkers, the program of Solidarnosc was:

“in tendency...for the dismantling of the planned economy, opening the road to the accumulation of private capital in Poland and, through the destruction of the monopoly of foreign trade, to open the floodgates to foreign capital.”

Well, at least they knew what the stakes were. The problem is that Workers Power did not care. After itemizing the pro-capitalist character of the movement, they concluded that all this “does not mean that we do not solidarise with Solidarnosc, as a movement of the Polish workers against their bureaucratic oppressors.” While admitting that its program was essentially counterrevolutionary, they argue that Solidarnosc’s mass base meant that it was, “despite its leadership...not a counter-revolutionary organisation per se.” If a political movement has mass support, Workers Power is prepared to say that it’s “rife with contradictions,” and back it no matter how reactionary its program.

In their resolution Workers Power maintained that they opposed the slogan, “Solidarnosc to power.” They wrote: “We do not advocate that restorationists take political power from the Stalinists.” Yet they criticized these same restorationists for their reformist stratagem that “avoided a direct challenge to the armed central power of the bureaucracy.” With the Polish proletariat arrayed behind a squad of rabid free marketeers, Catholic intellectuals and Pilsudskiite nationalists, the issue was not one of reform or revolution, but of defending collectivized property against counterrevolution. And despite their disclaimers, in the crunch Workers Power came down on the wrong side.

After the crackdown Workers Power echoed the imperialist calls for sanctions against the Jaruzelski regime, calling on workers to “boycott all imports from Poland whilst the repression continues.” It also called to “Take Poland out of the Warsaw Pact!” This is not the only time these supposed defensists called for the dissolution of the military alliance between the armed forces of the Soviet bloc.

The fake-Trotskyist left has, mercifully, little pull with the Polish working class. Still, Workers Power’s role was to offer a left cover for the Western imperialist drive to put Solidarnosc into government, and get the restorationist ball rolling in the deformed workers states. The headline of the September 1989 *Workers Power* read “Poland—No Return to Capitalism!” But these slippery centrists cannot evade their share of political responsibility for the fact that today Walesa is the Polish head of state and Solidarnosc is busy implementing the return to capitalism it promised in September 1981.

The Crisis of Stalinism

The Soviet bureaucracy’s decision to permit a Solidarnosc-led government in Poland in August 1989 signaled that the Kremlin was no longer prepared to guarantee its East European satellites militarily. This changed the whole political landscape of the region, as the Stalinist regimes began to crumble. While the armed forces at the core of the deformed workers states were still intact, openly pro-capitalist governments were established across Eastern Europe.

The “pro-democracy” movements that sprang up in one country after another were increasingly dominated by restorationist forces. Amidst the euphoria, revolutionaries had to tell the truth: the reimposition of the system of private property in Eastern Europe would be a defeat for the international proletariat.

Workers Power enthused about the “political revolutions” supposedly sweeping across Eastern Europe. Workers Power’s fine print occasionally cautioned that we were not yet seeing the *proletarian* phase of these political revolutions. Yet its headlines and slogans played on the resonance that the formulation “political revolution” has for the Trotskyist tradition. They suggested that we were seeing another Hungary 1956, that is, a revolutionary workers movement aimed at destroying the Stalinist political monopoly while retaining and defending collectivized property.

The crisis of East European Stalinism has revealed the

extent to which Workers Power retained the anti-Soviet third-campist methodology of its Cliffite parent. This is chiefly evident in a tendency to depict Stalinism as counter-revolutionary through and through. In the fine print, Workers Power remains capable of offering a more nuanced picture of the divisions and tensions within the Stalinist bureaucracy, and even of describing it in orthodox terms as a petty-bourgeois layer split by the sharpening polarity of the class struggle and the onslaught of capitalist restoration.

Yet there is an unmistakably Stalinophobic thrust to the group's positions. The Stalinist bureaucrats are depicted as having a capitalist-restorationist mission on a par with that of the imperialists. The November 1989 LRCI statement on the DDR, entitled "The Political Revolution in East Germany," demanded: "Down with Stalinist and imperialist plans to restore capitalism!" The problem with this slogan is that it fails to distinguish between the treachery of the Stalinist bureaucrats who capitulated to capitalist restoration and the imperialists who engineered it. In its July 1990 account of the demise of the DDR, Workers Power declared that "the principal enemy of the working class within the GDR" had not been the burgeoning forces of a renewed pan-German capitalism, but the rapidly disintegrating "bureaucratic state apparatus" (*Trotskyist International* No. 5, Autumn 1990).

Only after the *Anschluss* did they retreat a little on this. In an undated polemic they published early this year against Gruppe Spartakus (GS—German section of the IBT), the LRCI's German section, Gruppe Arbeitermacht (GAM), argued: "The main enemy (on the military level) in East Germany is now no longer the Soviet troops but the Bundeswehr and NATO troops....But an essential point remains the same: the function of the USSR's troops is pro-capitalist" ("Kritik und Phrase—Eine Antwort auf die Kritik der 'Gruppe Spartakus' an der 'Trotzkistischen Plattform'"). What then is there to choose from between Stalinism and imperialism? Not much, according to Workers Power.

Third Campism: Neither NATO nor the Warsaw Pact

Perhaps the clearest evidence of Workers Power's third campism was their call in November 1989: "For the expulsion of foreign troops from both [German] states" (*Workers Power*, November 1989). This position was reiterated in "The Political Revolution in East Germany." Addressing the question of Warsaw Pact troops in East Germany, Workers Power wrote: "We demand that they be removed, just as we demand that the NATO troops be kicked out of the BRG (sic)" (*Trotskyist International* No. 4).

Workers Power admits that the Warsaw Pact was "created in response to the imperialist threat to the Soviet Union and those states it had conquered," and that "its troops were and are a form of defence of the post-capitalist property relations of those states." Despite this, they "are in favour of its dissolution and the withdrawal of its troops" (*Workers Power*, March 1990). What difference is there between the classical third campism

of "Neither Washington nor Moscow" and Workers Power's refusal to choose between NATO and the Warsaw Pact?

Workers Power pretends that in calling for "the Soviet occupation troops" to get out of the DDR they were somehow fighting *against* capitalist restoration, as Gorbachev had already decided to cede the DDR to the Frankfurt bankers ("Stalinism in Crisis: The Road to Working Class Power"). But Gorbachev's willingness to withdraw Soviet military backing for the DDR and to pull his troops out was an essential aspect of the Soviet bureaucracy's betrayal of the working class. After the October 1990 reunification, the Bundeswehr and the West German police were free to enforce capitalist austerity on the workers of the former DDR.

Trotskyists recognize that, while Stalinism is indeed fundamentally counter-revolutionary, the bureaucracy is sometimes forced to defend the proletarian property forms on which it rests. In such cases revolutionaries call for a military bloc against restorationist forces. Workers Power will allow the theoretical possibility of a "tactical united front" with the Stalinists; but every time in the last decade when the defense of working-class property forms has actually been posed, Workers Power has failed to call for such a bloc.

Workers Power characterizes the Stalinists' postwar expropriation of the bourgeoisie in Eastern Europe as "counter-revolutionary" (*Workers Power*, January 1990). Since the birth of the German Democratic Republic was "counter-revolutionary," not to mention a "reactionary denial of the right of self-determination," (*Trotskyist International* No. 4) it's no wonder that Workers Power's opposition to capitalist reunification was so tepid.

In November 1989 these centrist muddleheads laid the groundwork for dodging the necessity to come out clearly against a possible *Anschluss*: "in principle," they wrote, they would argue for "revolutionary re-unification" and for the defense of collectivized property—but of course, in practice, "after the election the task will be to resist each and every attack on the workers and prevent a grossly undemocratic fusion of the two states" (*Ibid.*). Their German affiliate's August 1990 "action programme," proclaimed: "No to the undemocratic imposition of unification" (*Trotskyist International* No. 5). So while "in principle" Workers Power stood for counterposing revolutionary to bourgeois reunification, in practice they counterposed *democratic* capitalist reunification to *undemocratic* capitalist restoration.

In fact revolutionary reunification was not immediately on the agenda: the mass movement that brought down Honecker was a heterogeneous one with massive illusions in bourgeois democracy. The danger posed in the DDR was that of capitalist counterrevolution. But the LRCI was chiefly interested in getting in on the action: "Trotskyists must be prepared to support and participate in the ousting of Stalinist dictatorships even where the majority of the working class has no other clear objective and even when pro-capitalist forces are involved" (*Trotskyist International* No. 4). Just as it had earlier backed Solidarnosc, Workers Power hopped on the movement against the DDR's Stalinist regime without regard for who was taking the lead in that struggle

or in what direction it was heading.

Workers Power has a tendency to view anything that is anti-Stalinist as inherently progressive. Even in a retrospective assessment of the developments in the DDR, they remain hypnotized by the “mass movement:”

“from the beginning of December 1989 until January 1990 there were the objective conditions for a successful political revolution: the irresistible disintegration of the central structures of the bureaucracy and its repressive apparatus and an unbroken continuing mass movement with clear demands for the overthrow of the bureau-crazy—both in the setting of a sharpening economic crisis in the DDR.”

—*arbeitermacht* No. 6, June 1990

It is undeniable that the bureaucracy was collapsing, but this is only a necessary, and not a sufficient, condition for “a successful [workers] political revolution.” The political character of the “unbroken continuing mass movement” was a critical factor in determining events. The demand for “the overthrow of the bureau-crazy,” however “clear,” is not in itself a program. The capitalist restorationists of the DDR, including the openly fascist elements, wanted the “the overthrow of the bureaucracy.” The Trotskyist program of proletarian political revolution is premised on preserving collectivized property and instituting the democratic rule of the producers.

In the DDR in the winter of 1989-90, the “mass movement” had no such commitment. This distinguished it from the insurgent Hungarian working class in 1956. In a special German edition of 1917 distributed in the DDR in January 1990, our comrades wrote:

“There is an immediate critical danger for DDR workers. None of the main opposition groups has a program to save the DDR from becoming a second-rate appendage of Western capitalism. From the explicit call for capitalist restoration by the DDR Social Democracy (SDP) to the confused program for a non-existent ‘third way’ through ‘social market economy’ of the SED/PDS [DDR Stalinist party] reformers, all roads lead sooner or later to a capitalist counterrevolution. The intellectuals and Kombinat managers already show an appetite to become the administrators and bureaucrats serving FRG capitalism.

“The urgent task of the moment is to prevent capitalist reunification through workers soviets to fill the power vacuum in the DDR.”

Throughout the winter of 1989-90, the mass mobilizations in the DDR became increasingly nationalist and pro-capitalist in character. To this day Gruppe Arbeitermacht insists that even after the pro-capitalist de Maziere government took office, the “task of the day” was *not* the defense of the DDR, but the struggle against Stalinism. “Kritik und Phrase” takes the Gruppe IV. Internationale (one of the forerunners of the GS) to task because:

“There was no revolutionary situation for them, so they did not call for the overthrow of the bureaucracy as the task of the day; their programmatic declaration of May 1990 was entitled: ‘For workers’ action to defend the DDR!’”

The LRCI centrists were thoroughly disoriented by events in the DDR. In March 1990 they said: “As a result of the first phase of the political revolution a kind of democratic revolution has taken place” (*Trotskyist International* No. 4). In June they asked:

“Has the East German working class sustained a decisive and irreversible defeat? No, the question is more compli-

cated. The workers in the DDR achieved an historic victory by overthrowing the SED-bureaucracy after forty years’ rule and depriving the bureaucratic apparatus of power. They did not use this victory, however, and did not take the power. This is not yet a defeat, simply a delay of the decisive struggle.”

—*arbeitermacht* No. 6, June 1990

The replacement of the SED by the openly restorationist de Maziere government was indeed a “historic victory”—but for German capitalism, not the working class! In the next issue of their paper, the GAM semi-retracted its earlier estimation: “Now, has the working class not sustained a defeat? Yes, it has!” But—they added encouragingly—it has not “already lost the whole battle” (*arbeitermacht* No. 7, July 1990). By October, however, their attitude was more sober:

“The end of the workers’ state on German soil, however degenerate and bureaucratically deformed it was, constitutes an historic defeat of the German working class. It is a catastrophe made all the worse in that its historical significance is not recognised by the workers of the east or west.”

—*Trotskyist International* No. 5

The LRCI shares responsibility for this catastrophe. Instead of trying to attract the most class-conscious elements of the working class to resist the demolition of the workers state, these ostensible Marxists did their best to convince the workers that the destruction of the deformed German workers state was a “historic victory.” Once again Workers Power proved incapable of either swimming against the stream or telling the truth.

Today, just a few months after reunification, the working class is experiencing the effects of the capitalists’ victory—millions of workers are thrown on the scrap heap while prices and rents spiral upward. Many of these workers are asking themselves why they are even worse off than under Honecker. The LRCI has a lot to answer for.

But for Workers Power, yesterday’s politics were for yesterday. Today they are mourning the DDR that they did nothing to save:

“For all its oppressive SED command-socialism, the GDR was a real counter-weight to Federal German imperialism. It was, with all its tragic history, a proof of another—non-capitalist—Germany. It was...a state which could guarantee its citizens fundamental rights: the right to work, the right to a home, the right to a state funded pension in old age...It was evidence that the rule of the exploiter, the factory owner and the *Junker* is not eternal...It was this positive side for which the west would never forgive the GDR, not the bureaucratic despotism, the trampling on human rights, the orders to shoot, the lack of freedom of thought, the Stasi-spying and all the other things constantly raised by the patrons of human rights among democratic imperialists.”

—*Trotskyist International* No. 5

We can only wonder if this sudden turn has anything to do with the GAM’s new tactical perspectives. For, as a postscript to their betrayal, Gruppe Arbeitermacht joined the PDS (the successor to the Stalinist SED) to fish for new members.

Break With LRCI Centrism!

Gramsci wrote that revolutionaries should be guided by pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will:

Workers Power consistently inverts this dictum. As each new defeat looms, they offer cheery images of the “spectre” of working-class triumph. After “breaking” from the Cliffites, they soon discovered that Soviet defensism had a central drawback: it was unpopular in the petty-bourgeois radical milieu from which Workers Power seeks to recruit.

The LRCI is incapable of offering a revolutionary program to those who wish to struggle against the forces

of capitalist reaction because it is organically incapable of seeing the class line. The problem is not essentially a theoretical one. It is one of appetite: for the LRCI centrists are consistent in one thing only, the impulse to “go with the flow.” Subjective revolutionaries in Workers Power must break with their leadership’s Stalinophobic methodology, for those who cannot defend the gains of the past will never win new ones in the future. ■