

In Defense of the Revolutionary Tendency Cuba, the LRCI and Marxist Theory

In a recent polemic on the collapse of the Soviet Union (see accompanying article) Keith Harvey, a leading theoretician of the League for a Revolutionary Communist International (LRCI) alleges that the roots of the International Bolshevik Tendency's "anti-Trotskyist method" can be traced to an erroneous position on the Cuban Revolution originally developed by the Spartacist League of the 1960s.

We welcome the opportunity to take up the LRCI's views on this question, since the Cuban Revolution is of particular importance for post-war Trotskyism. The Cuban events helped clarify important aspects of the social overturns in China, Yugoslavia and Vietnam after World War II. The key question, in the words of the LRCI's leading section, the British Workers Power (WP) group, is:

"...how has capitalism been overthrown in a whole series of countries without the *independent* action of the working class playing the decisive role, and what are the implications of this for *revolutionary strategy*?"

After the overtly counterrevolutionary role played by Moscow in strangling the Spanish Revolution in the 1930s, the Trotskyist movement tended to view Stalinism simply as an anti-revolutionary agency in the working class, not qualitatively different from social democracy. After World War II, the phenomenon of indigenous Stalinist-led insurrectionary peasant movements taking power and liquidating the bourgeoisie *without* the intervention of either the Soviet bureaucracy or the working class, a phenomenon unforeseen by Trotsky, created a "crisis of theory" for his followers.

Pabloism and Post-War Stalinism

The leadership of the Fourth International, headed by Michel Pablo, concluded that the Stalinists could be forced to "roughly outline a revolutionary orientation," and foresaw "centuries" of deformed workers' states on the horizon. The Pablo leadership, anticipating the imminent outbreak of World War III between the USSR and world imperialism, considered that there was no time to forge independent mass revolutionary parties. Instead they proposed a tactic of "entrism *sui generis*" in which the existing Trotskyist cadres should dissolve themselves into Stalinist, social-democratic, and even petty-bourgeois nationalist parties in order to pressure them to the left.

The leadership of the American Socialist Workers Party (SWP), historically the strongest section of the international, carried out a belated and partial struggle against Pablo's liquidationism, in which they reasserted the necessity for independent revolutionary (i.e., Trotskyist) parties. While this fight represented a defense of

Bolshevism against liquidationism, the SWP's "orthodox" was flawed and one-sided, and too often amounted to little more than a denial that the post-war social overturns posed any new questions. Joseph Hansen spoke for the SWP leadership when he asserted that Stalinism is counterrevolutionary through and through, an erroneous characterization which denied that Stalinist formations could spearhead anti-capitalist social overturns. This empirically false assertion, made in the heat of the struggle against Pablo's supporters, both reflected the political disorientation of the SWP leadership and contributed to disarming the party cadres politically.

Castroism vs. Trotskyism in the SWP

When Fidel Castro's petty-bourgeois guerrillas smashed Fulgencio Batista's neo-colonial regime and the bourgeois state apparatus, and then two years later nationalized the economy, the SWP leadership became Fidelistas and began hailing Castro as an "unconscious Marxist." This political capitulation laid the basis for a 1963 reunification with the Pabloists, which launched the pseudo-Trotskyist United Secretariat of the Fourth International, today headed by Ernest Mandel.

Opponents of the adaptation to Castroism within the SWP founded the Revolutionary Tendency (RT) to fight the revisionism of the leadership. In a key document, the RT drew a parallel between the course of the Cuban Revolution and the Chinese Revolution led by Mao Tse Tung:

"The transformation of China into a deformed workers state was instituted, not by the working class of China nor primarily because of great pressure from the working class—it was carried through on top on the initiative of the Maoist bureaucracy itself as a defensive act against imperialism.

"It is now quite clear that Cuba has followed the model of China quite closely. It was primarily the support of the peasantry which pushed Castro into power. The extensive nationalizations were *primarily* initiated by the regime itself in response to imperialist provocation and not by the working class which generally tailed these events.

"Cuba makes this process all the more clear precisely because of the central *unique* feature of the Cuban revolution—that the transformation into a deformed workers state occurred under the leadership of a party which was not even ostensibly 'working class,' by a non-Stalinist petty-bourgeois formation."

—"Cuba and the Deformed Workers States"

The RT argued that the Castroist guerrillas were no substitute for the class-conscious proletariat, and concluded that the road to socialism could only be opened through a political revolution:

“It is a matter of replacing the rule of a petty-bourgeois apparatus with the rule of the working class itself. Changes in the economic structure would not be so profound, and that is why we characterize such a change as a *political*, as contrasted to a *social* revolution.”

The RT’s essentially correct analysis of the Cuban Revolution cut through many of the theoretical difficulties that had surrounded the post-war social transformations. Moreover, the RT correctly generalized its criticisms of the SWP leadership’s capitulation to Castro, and linked them to the whole adaptationist methodology which destroyed the Fourth International. In its 1962 founding document, the RT wrote:

“Pabloism is essentially a revisionist current within the Trotskyist movement internationally which has lost a revolutionary world perspective during the post-war period of capitalist boom and the subsequent relative inactivity of the working class in the advanced countries. The Pabloites tend to replace the role of the working class and its organized vanguard—that is, the world Trotskyist movement—with other forces which seem to offer greater chances of success.”

—“In Defense of a Revolutionary Perspective”

The RT defended the centrality of the subjective factor—and the importance of the struggle for the Trotskyist program against those who saw the struggle for world revolution as a semi-automatic unfolding objective “process.” In this the RT carried forward the positive aspects of the SWP leadership’s earlier struggle against Pabloist liquidationism, and ensured the *political* continuity of the struggle of the Left Opposition and the Fourth International under Trotsky. When the RT cadres were bureaucratically expelled from the SWP in 1963, they launched the Spartacist League (SL) which uniquely upheld the heritage of authentic Trotskyism for the next decade and a half, before its qualitative degeneration into the pseudo-Trotskyist obedience cult it is today.

Workers Power’s ‘Degenerated Revolution’

The core of the British Workers Power group emerged from the British International Socialists led by Tony Cliff in the mid-1970s. Cliff’s group had been expelled from the Fourth International in the early 1950s for its cowardly refusal to defend North Korea against U.S. imperialism. Workers Power retained a version of the IS’s nonsensical “state capitalist” analysis of the USSR and the deformed workers’ states for some years after leaving the Cliffites. In the early 1980s it began to distance itself from this position, and began projecting itself as a representative of authentic Trotskyism.

Most of the major international claimants to the tradition of Trotskyism at the time (e.g., groups associated with Ernest Mandel, Gerry Healy or Pierre Lambert) could be easily dismissed politically, but the Revolutionary Tendency (and its successor, the Spartacist League) had to be taken more seriously. The British Spartacist operation, whose cadres were already shell-shocked by several years of brutal and apolitical purges, exerted little appeal. Yet, if the RT alone had been essentially correct on the difficult political questions that had bedeviled post-war Trotskyism, then the legitimacy of

Workers Power’s claim to have uniquely reestablished an authentically Trotskyist tendency, and therefore its historical justification for existence, would be called into question.

In the early 1980s Workers Power devoted considerable resources to an internal re-examination of the history of the Russian question and the Trotskyist movement. The fruit of this work was the publication in 1982 of a lengthy pamphlet entitled *The Degenerated Revolution*. This was an attempt to analyze the whole phenomenon of Stalinism, particularly the post-war social overturns, and to settle accounts with WP’s previous “state capitalist” analysis.

For a small group it was an ambitious undertaking, and much of the history of the post-war period was competently sketched. But the tract’s opaque and confusionist theoretical generalizations suggest that the group’s leadership was as concerned that Workers Power’s insights be original and unique as anything else.

The authors, who had for years mistaken the bureaucratized workers’ states for capitalist ones, boldly claimed to be the first people to understand the whole problem of the post-war property transformations. “The plain truth is that the elements of the shattered Trotskyist tradition have never fully understood the real nature of the Stalinist regimes” intoned the WP theoreticians. While they themselves only recently discovered that Cliff’s state capitalist theory was “wrong, and that Trotsky’s analysis provided a correct alternative” they went on to add: “Correct, but not fully developed....”

In “developing” Trotsky’s analysis, WP was particularly concerned to demonstrate that all previous attempts to deal with the question, particularly those of the RT, were inadequate. To launch *The Degenerated Revolution* in 1982, Workers Power invited the Spartacist League/Britain (SL/B) to participate in a public debate. But the SL/B, itself already badly degenerated, chose to avoid a political confrontation and instead staged a stupid macho provocation (see *Spartacist Britain*, December 1982). This let Workers Power’s leaders off the hook politically and reinforced the impression among their followers that their critique of the RT’s position was unassailable.

LRCI’s Critique of the RT on Cuba

In his recent polemic against us (see *Trotskyist International* No. 11) Keith Harvey purports to trace the root of IBT errors on the Russian question to the RT/SL’s position on Cuba:

“In attempting to analyse the Cuban Revolution the leaders of the Spartacists developed the idea that the Castro bonapartist regime in 1959 and 1960 did not defend either capitalism or any other set of property relations. Rather it was a petit-bourgeois government that was uncommitted to the defence of either....until Castro finally jumped into the camp of Stalinism under the hostile pressure of the USA and turned Cuba into a deformed workers’ state.”

—*Trotskyist International*, No. 11, May 1993

The LRCI rejects such notions, and argues that a bonapartist petty-bourgeois regime like that of Castroids in 1959-60 “can oscillate under the pressure of more fundamental forces between defending first one

and later a different set of property relations..." (*Ibid.*)

We shall come back to the Kautskyist implications of imagining that states can "oscillate" between defending the interests of one social class and another. For the moment we wish to consider the LRCI's charge that our supposed methodological error of "attribut[ing] the class character of the state to the subjective intentions of the office holders." This same criticism is made in *The Degenerated Revolution*, where Workers Power asserts that those who argue that "a state is defined as 'armed bodies of men *dedicated* to defending a particular property form'" have an "idealist notion of the relationship between property relations and the state machine."

Against such "idealism" WP sagely pronounces that, "We judge the class nature of a state by its *actions*, not by the 'dedication' of the individuals who make up its apparatus." The question is not one of the personal dedication of individual functionaries to the performance of their duties, but the *connection of the apparatus of repression* to the interests of a particular social class, i.e., to the defense of a particular set of property relations. This can only be assessed on the basis of its actions. It is simply an empirical fact that in Cuba for almost two years the Castroite July 26 Movement possessed a monopoly of political and military power, but its *actions* demonstrated that it was neither committed to defending private property nor to expropriating it.

The petty-bourgeois Castroist apparatus, after first establishing a monopoly of armed force, proceeded to organize the administration of governmental functions on the national, regional and municipal level. The bourgeoisie was politically and militarily, but not economically, expropriated. Prior to the massive expropriation of foreign and domestic capital in the autumn of 1960, the July 26 Movement was not definitively committed either to a system of private or collectivized property. The Castroite apparatus at this point was only "committed" to the defense of its political monopoly and could not therefore be considered to constitute a state in the Marxist sense, i.e., an armed body defending a particular form of property.

Trotsky described the Stalinist bureaucracy in the USSR as a petty-bourgeois caste which grew up within the administrative apparatus of the besieged workers' state and appropriated the role of "gendarme." In Cuba, the Castroist bureaucracy played the role of "gendarme," but it existed *before* the creation of the collectivized economy and indeed, was instrumental in creating it. The July 26 Movement originated as a radical nationalist movement which aspired to rid Cuba of the corrupt, neo-colonial Batista regime and open the road for the free development of the patriotic bourgeoisie. In 1959-60, as the Castroists came into increasingly sharp conflict with the Cuban bourgeoisie and their U.S. godfathers, the July 26 Movement split, and a right wing, led by Hubert Matos, went over to the imperialists. In the end, the Castro leadership refused to knuckle under to Washington and opted instead for collectivizing the economy.

The ability of the July 26 Movement to make such a choice was conditioned by a number of factors: the destruction of Batista's state apparatus, the absence of the working class as an independent political factor, and

the existence of the bureaucratized Soviet workers' state which was willing and able to provide military and economic support.

LRCI on Cuban Revolution: 'Predominantly Counter-revolutionary'

According to Workers Power, when the Castroists took power they formed a "popular front" which defended capitalism while presiding over a "nine-month period of dual power." The "fragmentation of state power" in this period "ran through the army *and* the J26M itself." But it is a mistake to talk of "dual power" in Cuba in 1959. The period in which there was a sort of "dual power" ended when the guerrilla army marched triumphantly into Havana on New Year's Eve. The July 26 Movement was riven with internal contradictions, but its military and political hegemony was undisputed. There was no dual power in society.

According to Workers Power's chronology, by "November 1959, the popular front had been ended, along with the duality of power." At this point the LRCI claim that the Castroists established a "*bourgeois* workers' and peasants' government" which, in turn, was somehow transmogrified in the summer of 1960 into a "*bureaucratic* anti-capitalist workers' government" which proceeded to carry out large-scale expropriations of the capitalists. Finally, "From the implementation of the first Five Year Plan in 1962, we can speak of the creation of a degenerate workers' state in Cuba." Their conclusion is that "Castro, who in 1959 was a bonaparte for the enfeebled Cuban bourgeoisie was, by 1962, a bonaparte 'for' the politically expropriated Cuban working class."

Workers Power presented this confused and arbitrary schema as an important contribution to Marxist theory. In fact it contains a profound *revision* of the Marxist understanding of the state as an instrument of coercion used by one class against another. According to the LRCI, in January 1959 Castro headed a Cuban "state" which "defended capitalism," yet which, over the next several years, gradually evolved into a (deformed) workers' state. This is the background to Keith Harvey's doubletalk about how:

"It is well within the marxist understanding of Bonapartism to recognise that a petit-bourgeois regime can oscillate under the pressure of more fundamental forces between defending first one and later a different set of property relations. It does not mean that the governmental regime becomes detached from the state which it administers. The class character of the state is defined as always by whatever social form of property exists and is actually being defended by bodies of armed men and women."

Clear as mud. You see, we can have "a petit-bourgeois regime" which oscillates between classes without ever becoming "detached from the state which it administers." Harvey thinks the "class character of the state" in the case of such oscillations can be determined by the activity of such a regime at any given instant—when it acts for the capitalists, it is a capitalist state, but, if it takes some action that favors working people, it becomes a workers' state. The kind of "Marxism" that "understands" such notions is called Kautskyism.

Lenin attacked the idea that a bourgeois state can be transformed into an instrument to serve the interests of the oppressed:

“That the state is an organ of the rule of a definite class which *cannot* be reconciled with its antipode (the class opposite to it), is something the petty-bourgeois democrats will never be able to understand.”

—*State and Revolution*

Lenin categorically rejected the idea that an oscillating petty-bourgeois regime (or anything else) can turn a capitalist state into an instrument for social revolution:

“Revolution consists not in the new class commanding, governing with the aid of the *old* state machine, but in this class *smashing* this machine and commanding, governing with the aid of a *new* machine. Kautsky slurs over this *basic* idea of Marxism, or he had utterly failed to understand it.”

The LRCI position on Cuba slurs over this same basic idea. The historic position developed by the RT/SL, which we defend, is the only way in which the genesis of the Cuban deformed workers’ state can be explained without doing violence to either the actual historical events or the Marxist understanding of the state as an organ of class rule.

Where the Pabloists identified the Cuban Revolution with the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, the RT recognized that although the Castroists expropriated the bourgeoisie, the bureaucratic regime they established was an obstacle to the further development of the revolution, and had to be removed through workers’ political revolution. At the same time, the RT recognized that the destruction of capitalism in Cuba, China and Vietnam represented historic gains for the international working class *despite* the bureaucratic deformations of the Stalinist regimes that came to power.

The LRCI draws precisely the opposite conclusion. The Workers Power pamphlet baldly asserts: “Whilst gains were made for and by the working class....*the Cuban overturn had a predominantly counter-revolutionary character*” (emphasis added). This echoes the arguments of Tony Cliff and other pseudo-Marxists who renounced

the social content of the anti-capitalist overturns because they objected to the character of the bureaucratic Stalinist political regimes that issued from them.

While in theory defending collectivized property, the LRCI has repeatedly in practice ascribed a progressive dynamic to the champions of capitalist restoration, from Polish Solidarnosc in 1981, to the movement for capitalist reunification in East Germany, to Boris Yeltsin’s rabble in Moscow in 1991. If some gang of pro-imperialist *gusanos* in Havana were to attempt to oust the Castroists and reverse the results of what Workers Power considers a “predominantly counter-revolutionary” social revolution, we suppose that the LRCI will once again throw its support to the forces of capitalist restoration. In that case we will find ourselves, once again, on the opposite side of the barricades from the LRCI and the rest of the centrists and social democrats who inhabit the Third Camp.

The core of the RT’s position on the Cuban Revolution is as clear and logically compelling today as it was three decades ago. Fidel Castro led a victorious peasant-based guerrilla insurrection which, in the absence of the working class as an independent political factor, smashed capitalist property relations and established a society modeled on the degenerated Soviet workers’ state. The lesson of Cuba is, as the revolutionary Spartacist League stated in 1966, that:

“the petty-bourgeois peasantry, under the most *favorable* historic circumstances conceivable could achieve no third road, neither capitalist, nor working class. Instead all that has come out of China and Cuba was a state of the same order as that issuing out of the political counter-revolution of Stalin in the Soviet Union, the degeneration of October. That is why we are led to define states such as these as *deformed workers states*. And the experience since the Second World War, properly understood, offers not a basis for revisionist turning away from the perspective and necessity of revolutionary working-class power, but rather it is a great vindication of Marxian theory and conclusions under new and not previously expected circumstances.”