

Communist principles of youth organisation

Fri, 30/04/2004 - 22:00

For Lenin and Trotsky, it was essential that revolutionary youth organisations, despite their political allegiance to revolutionary communist parties and an International, should be free from all tutelage and domination by the latter. They thought such independence would give youth the best possible introduction to politics and the class struggle by giving them full responsibility for making their own decisions, successes and failures. More than that, they believed that the revolutionary youth had a vital role to play in helping to keep the parties and the unions on a bold and revolutionary course. Luke Cooper looks at these principles and how they apply in the fight for a new revolutionary youth International today.

The great youth radicalisation of 2003 saw millions of young people take the road of struggle against war, imperialism and global capital. Youth are again in the vanguard of the mass movement. This was clear in the historic demonstrations of 15th February when at least 20 million took to the streets of every major city in the world. These protests represented the emergence of a new generation taking to the streets to oppose imperialist war. Later, this was manifested in the unprecedented wave of school student strikes in the first days of the war which spread across Europe, the USA, Australia and the Middle East.

Revolutionaries were surprised only by the sheer scale of this radicalism. Even a glance at the history books shows that young people have repeatedly been receptive to radical ideas, to militant struggle and, indeed, to revolutionary communism. Why this lack of conservatism, relative to older workers? Quite simply it comes from the fact that, unlike the latter, they have not yet experienced the mind numbing effect of years of bourgeois ideology, the demoralising effect of accumulated defeats, and the influence of reformism within the organised labour movement. All of these spread a resignation amongst many older workers to the supposed impossibility of any fundamental social change in their lifetime. Nor does such radicalism end when young people leave school. Journalists all commented on the youth of the Italian metalworkers of FIOM who struck in protest at the murder of Carlo Giuliani in Genoa and then led a series of strikes over the next two years for their own demands.

It is natural for young people to be directly concerned about the future, to be sensitive to injustice and suffering, to be impatient about the yawning gap between the high flown idealism of our rulers? words and the squalid indifference to suffering and shocking cruelty of their actions. However, it is not just that young people are positively enthusiastic to take up the causes of others, they have their own battles to fight. Under capitalism they suffer a systematic oppression. The absence of legal equality, economic dependence on the family, irksome control over, or non-recognition of, their sexual lives, authoritarian education, super-exploitation either in low paid dead end jobs or as apprentices, all make young people into second class citizens. Moreover, the jobs available to them often mean effective exclusion from trade unions and even when they can join a union all too often they face discrimination there, too. This is true even in political organisations. Bourgeois society regards all this as a natural burden of being young. After all ?we had to suffer this when we were young? and in any case ?they will grow out of it.?

The huge number of young people involved in the anti war movement is a reflection of the fact that they have a direct interest in opposing capitalist militarism and war. Around the globe it is young women and men who are the foremost victims of war. Many states conscript them at 16 or 18 before they have had an opportunity to use their civil rights: old enough to die but not to vote. In the civil wars that have raged in the Global South, children have been forced into armies and militias from the moment they are old enough to hold a gun. In the chaos of these wars, rape, ethnic cleansing, responsibility for caring for the old and very young, all fall heavily on young women.

Young people around the world have plenty to fight back against and they are doing so in increasing numbers and with greater radicalism. These struggles are not just good for young people themselves they can play a regenerative role for the older generation who suffered serious defeats, encouraging them back into struggle and renewing their faith in the power of working class action to change the world.

The revolutionary youth organisation

The specific circumstances in which young people live, study, and work for many create barriers to recruitment into a revolutionary party. Special forms of agitation and methods of organising are therefore required if the revolutionary organisation is not to become ever older and less capable of relating to the concerns and lives of youth. For this reason, in the past, the revolutionary workers' movement developed specific forms of publication and activities aimed at young people. It also developed special youth organisations and movements. The revolutionary wing of the movement conceived of these not as carbon copies of the party for young people, still less as strictly subordinate bodies, but as distinct organisations. They were to be organisationally independent of the party, whilst the young cadres of the revolutionary party inside them would fight to win them to political solidarity with revolutionary parties and international organisations. This independent form of organisation aimed to bring youth into struggle, connecting them closely to the party, but enabling them to learn from their own experience independently of the adults.

The political theory behind organisational independence was developed by the Bolsheviks in the early 20th century. Historically, the Bolsheviks themselves had a very youthful age profile. In 1907, 60 per cent of the Bolsheviks were under 25 and a fifth of them were teenagers, while only one third of their rivals, the Mensheviks, were under 25 years old and 5 per cent of them teenagers. The Mensheviks always complained of this in a totally patronising way. The Bolsheviks were just immature youngsters, they said.

Defending his party against the charge that the Bolsheviks had no experienced cadres in their ranks, Lenin quoted Frederick Engels: 'Is it not natural that youth should predominate in our party, the revolutionary party? We are the party of the future and the future belongs to the youth. We are the party of innovators, and it is always the youth that most eagerly follows the innovators. We are a party that is waging a self-sacrificing struggle against the old rotteness, and youth is always the first to undertake a self-sacrificing struggle.' 1

Indeed, it was the youthful make up of the Bolsheviks that made them bold, self-sacrificing, able to resist the huge pressure of bourgeois patriotism when the First World War broke out. It was this young party that made the October Revolution. It was young people right across Europe, who launched the struggle against the traitors in the Second International when they broke all their pre-war pledges and supported the imperialist war. In 1915 and 1916, the majority of the pre-war Socialist Youth International overthrew its patriotic leadership and joined the movement against the war and for a new International. Lenin and the Bolsheviks defended and encouraged this revolt. In fact, the revolt against opportunism had begun before the war within the youth organisations attached to the Second International. In Belgium, Germany, Italy and France, young revolutionaries fought for the independence of the youth leagues against the bureaucratic party and trade union leaders. These leaders hated the independence and radicalism of the

youth organisations and did everything in their power to subordinate them to strict party control. Lenin sided with the young rebels against the old bureaucrats.

He observed in 1916: "The middle aged and the aged often do not know how to approach the youth, for the youth must of necessity advance to socialism in a different way, by other paths, in other forms, in other circumstances than their fathers. Incidentally, that is why we must favour organisational independence of the Youth League, not only because the opportunists fear such independence, but because of the very nature of the case. For, unless they have complete independence, the youth will be unable either to train good socialists from their midst or prepare themselves to lead socialism forward." 2

Thus organisational independence was, for the Bolsheviks, a principle that applied not only to the youth sections of reformist parties but also to the new parties of communists that had to be created. They not only upheld the right of the Youth Leagues of the Second International to independence from the control of the centrist, reformist and social-patriotic International Bureau but advocated it for the new International they were seeking to found. Thus, when the Third (Communist) International was founded, it also held that, even where youth organisations had voluntarily decided to affiliate to the Communist Parties, to participate in their political discussions, to be represented in their structures and recognise the authority of the party's decisions for the communist movement as a whole, this "in no way implies loss of the organisational independence which is so essential for political education." 3

That is to say the youth organisations had themselves made the decision to accept the party leadership. If they did not accept these decisions, then they had the right to formally break their link. It was not until the bureaucratic "Bolshevisation" drive was initiated by the Fifth Congress of the Comintern in 1924 that this independence was removed, with disastrous consequences for the revolutionary education of the young communists and for the International.

Distinct from the question of organisational independence is the issue of whether the youth organisation should formally adhere to, and be directly bound by, the political decisions of the revolutionary party. This must be judged in the context of the specific historical development of the revolutionary movement in a given country. The Communist International first considered this question in August 1920, at its second congress. It did so faced with a situation in which mass proletarian youth organisations had broken with the social democratic and centrist parties, had taken the road of struggle against the First Imperialist war and against the social traitors, and were now rallying to the defence of the Russian Revolution.

A meeting of delegates who constituted themselves a new Communist Youth International took place alongside the congress. Special Theses on the Youth Movement were then adopted by the Executive Committee of the Communist International at a joint meeting with youth representatives. These explained the appropriate relations between the youth organisation and the revolutionary party, nationally and internationally. The theses again insisted on the organisational independence of the youth movements in the most unambiguous terms:

"The entire history of the proletarian youth movement in every country shows that only independent, that is self-governing, youth organisations develop bold and determined revolutionary fighters and astute organisers of the proletarian revolution and soviet power ... By contrast, the social patriots' exercise of tutelage over the youth results in an opportunist, petty bourgeois development." 4

The theses then went on to deal with the issue of political independence. They explained that in countries in which the working class had not yet established a strong revolutionary party and "where the formation of Communist parties is still in flux and the youth organisations are just breaking away from the social patriotic and centrist parties, our main slogan is that of the absolute political independence of the youth

movement. Under such conditions this slogan is objectively revolutionary!?

The Bolsheviks recognised that, in the absence of a substantial revolutionary party, the youth could, and usually did, play a vanguard role in rallying opposition to war and the apparatuses of treason. The absolute independence and freedom of action of the revolutionary and anti-imperialist youth was, therefore, paramount for the development of a strong revolutionary movement unencumbered by the stranglehold of the reformist and centrist organisations. In short, the political independence of the youth movement allowed revolutionary elements within it to promote their views and campaign for leadership of the youth. More than this, they could be, along with splits from the reformist organisations, a major force for creating a new revolutionary communist party.

However, at this time, in certain countries, the working class movement had already succeeded in forming strong revolutionary communist parties. This was achieved through the efforts of the anti-imperialist left wing of the social-democracy, the influence of the Communist International, the attraction of the Russian Revolution and the efforts of the youth themselves. In such advantageous conditions, the vanguard role in organising the struggle of the working class for power fell not to the youth but to a vanguard workers' party. Thus the Theses went on: 'the slogan of absolute independence is wrong, however, in countries where there are already strong Communist parties, and where this slogan is used by the social patriots and the centrists against the Communist youth and to mislead the youth. There, the Communist youth organisations based themselves on the programme of the Communist Party.' 5

Was this an example of double standards or cynicism? Not in the least. In the first place, as we have seen above, the Comintern insisted on the continued organisational independence of the youth in every country. Secondly, the Comintern vehemently rejected all 'tutelage' of the youth, any domineering and patronising approach which would reproduce between the party and youth organisation the master and pupil relationship typical of the bourgeois school, the workshop and the family. Thirdly, in contrast to the reformist and centrist parties, the youth were to participate as equals in the internal democratic decision making processes of the party itself. Fourthly, in all circumstances, this type of adherence of the organisationally independent youth movement to the party was to be a product of the voluntary decision of the youth themselves, through their being won freely and democratically to the programme and project of the Party, and not through the exercise of commands or controls:

'In all countries where old and active Communist parties existed, a strong relationship between the Communist Party and the Communist youth organisation was established. The form this took was that the Communist youth organisation adopted the programme of the Communist Party and functioned in the framework of its political positions. At the same time, in these cases, the youth (1) had their own centralised organisation; (2) decided for themselves how to carry out their organisational, agitational and propaganda activities; (3) decided the place and the forms of their participation in political struggle; and (4) discussed the main political questions. All youth organisations must arrive at this relationship with the Communist Party, not through compulsion by the party, but by being convinced and making their own free decision.'

The theses also established that the Communist Youth International, which united all communist youth organisations, should be part of the Communist International. The CYI and its national groups were to 'take part in the congresses of the Communist International. The executive committees of the Communist International and the Youth International would exchange representatives with decisive votes.'

The aim of the CYI was 'the centralised leadership of the Communist youth movement, support of the national Communist youth groups, the formation of Communist youth groups where none yet exist, and international agitation around the ideas of communism and the youth movement.'

As a fully participating part of the Communist International with full rights, the CYI as such ...subordinates itself to the decisions of the congresses of the Communist International and the political directives of its Executive Committee. Nevertheless, it carries out independently its work of leading, organising, strengthening, and broadening the youth international.

Relation of the youth organisation to revolutionary groups today

Is political independence appropriate only for left-moving youth linked to reformist/centrist parties? Is political dependence always the correct relationship for a youth organisation linked to a revolutionary group, whatever its size or the stage of its development towards being a real party of the workers' vanguard? To say yes to these propositions would be schematic and false.

Leon Trotsky in 1938 advised the SWP (US Section of the Fourth International) a cadre organisation with good worker militants but by no means yet a mass organisation, that, at the early stage of the development of a revolutionary youth group, a flexible approach should be adopted. His words echoed those of Lenin in 1916:

... if we approach the young comrades with a general conception such as this: 'Boys and girls, you acted very well against the Socialist Party because it was a bad party; but we are a good party. Don't forget it. You must not oppose us.' How can you convince them with such a general conception? It is very dangerous. 'You believe it is a good party, but we don't believe it!'. 'Yes, we are against vanguardism insofar as it is directed against us.' Then they will answer, 'You are bureaucrats, no more, no less.' It is very dangerous. Theoretically, it is correct, like the question of discipline. Iron discipline, steel discipline, is absolutely necessary, but if the apparatus of the young party begins by demanding such iron discipline on the first day it can lose the party. It is necessary to educate confidence in the party in general because the leadership is only an expression of the party ...?5

What is the lesson of this for today? In no country has the working class vanguard yet constituted a revolutionary communist party. Over recent years, we have seen a weakening of left social-democracy and Stalinism as mass forces. Anarchism, which revived in the late 1990s and early years of the new millennium, shows signs of weakening due to its inability to face up to the tasks of real mass struggle and defeating reformism. The experience of the youth in the antiwar movement was valuable in this regard. It is precisely these conditions which have given rise to a huge and very heterogeneous movement against war, capitalism, racism and imperialism, consisting of mass youth mobilisations not hegemonised by any one political force. It has thrown up new forms of organisation, such as social forums.

Today, we are closer to the conditions the Second Congress theses describe, in which the absence of mass communist parties puts the radicalised youth in the vanguard. Our task is to initiate and build mass organisations of the revolutionary youth, independent of the apparatuses of reformism and centrism, and to help them to find their way to revolutionary communism.

It is essential to convince these youth organisations to commit themselves to communism and to struggle constantly to maintain this commitment. Therefore, it is the job of revolutionaries to fight for their political programme within such organisations, give a political and fighting lead in struggle and win respect for their own politics, method and fighting capacity. Communists must aim to win the youth organisation to adopt their programme, to the struggle for a new, Fifth International and the establishment of revolutionary parties based on a transitional programme of socialist revolution.

Hence the question arises; should revolutionary youth organisations, today, adhere to the national sections of communist groupings even where they remain small fighting propaganda societies? No, to do so would

be tactically naive. Revolutionaries should fight for the youth organisations to express political solidarity with the activity and programme of communist cadre organisations but not to subordinate themselves to the decisions of such groups. Broader forces must be won to the revolutionary youth movement than can be won, at least from the outset, to accept the leadership of a small propaganda society that does not yet lead a section of the masses and as such cannot demonstrate the superiority of its programme through leadership of any significant section of the working class. Solidarity should, however, be secured with the programme and struggle of revolutionary communist forces, through joint activity and programmatic debate.

However, the absence of a revolutionary party in a given country does not mean that there is NO relationship between the revolutionary youth movement and the struggle for the revolutionary party, or that the youth movement is merely a repository for future recruits to the communist cadre organisations. On the contrary, where there is no revolutionary party, the revolutionary youth organisation must become an instrument for its creation.

The Revolutionary Youth International and the Fifth International

In the anticapitalist and antiwar movements, a vanguard, consisting overwhelmingly of young activists, has emerged which has the potential to form new mass revolutionary youth organisations. These, in turn, could act as catalysts to encourage the formation of new mass revolutionary organisations of the working class. In certain countries, especially those where young workers have come to the forefront of working class struggles, as in Italy, they could actually become the nucleus around which such parties would form. However, such is the character of the ?movement of movements? that this plethora of young people does not have an international organisation into which all youth entering the movement are drawn. Indeed, both the anticapitalist and antiwar movements have been characterised by a mass of non-aligned individuals willing to take action on the streets against neo liberalism and war but not yet ready to fight consciously for the politics of any of the particular political tendencies within the movement itself.

The absence of a mass youth organisation, whether reformist, centrist or revolutionary, on an international scale, has meant that the voice of the youthful militant majority who took to the streets in the great anticapitalist and anti-war mobilisations of the past few years has not been heard when these movements have come together to discuss programme and strategy. At the Social Forums of Porto Alegre, Florence, Hyderabad, Paris and, most recently, in Mumbai, the youth dominated the floors of the workshops, seminars and huge plenary sessions, yet the platforms themselves were made up of the traditional ?old? academics, journalists and politicians of the post-1960s left. These are not the people who risked their skins on the streets opposing the neo liberal agenda, Moreover, most of these ?big names? have a political agenda of wanting to drive the movement into an accommodation with capitalism and turn it into a lobbying group for nothing more than token reforms.

In such circumstances, revolutionary Communists must argue for young people to be able to lead and direct the struggle. This will mean that young people will need to form their own organisations.

Of course, there are already many youth organisations associated with parties, trade unions, NGOs, and even faith organisations, whose members really do want to change the world. We are not starting from scratch. That is why we think it is necessary to issue a call for a new mass revolutionary youth international to give a political structure and direction to the vanguard of youth who have already proven their capacity to take militant action. To do this will mean forming united fronts with groups who also want to give young people an organisational and political voice, but who may not be won at first to the historic revolutionary programme of the working class. To make immediate agreement with this programme a pre-requisite for the establishment of an international would, of course, be an absurdity and would actually go against the Marxist principles of youth organisation we have outlined.

Conversely, the formation of a youth international in which programmatic discussion and, therefore, the discussion of political strategy, was absent, even suppressed, or which limited itself to being nothing more than a united front around certain campaigning initiatives, would represent just as much of a dead end for the struggle against capitalism. Therefore, in forming alliances for the formation of a new revolutionary youth international, Communists put forward three key principles. These are, firstly, that the new organisation we seek to build must be centred on the discussion of, and eventual decision on, a programme, for which communists must themselves put forward and argue a revolutionary strategy. This is not to paralyse the structures of the new organisation in a conflict between different political tendencies but rather to say that these debates on programme, strategy and action are crucial. Secondly, democratic decision-making to agree on the immediate and burning tasks which face us today. Thirdly, once discussed and decided upon, the decisions of the majority must be implemented. In short, we advocate a system of democratic centralism, total freedom in discussion, loyal unity in action. In this way, the call is not a bland call for 'unity' based on a lowest common denominator but a call for a new international political organisation of radical youth.

Here and now, important steps can be taken to build this new organisation. Communists must seek alliances with youth organisations on issues on which they have political agreement. This may, for example, take the form of joint days of action against neo-liberalism or joint seminars and workshops around issues effecting youth. In taking these joint initiatives, communists can build trust with other key forces that can potentially be won to a new international and also take revolutionary politics to a broader audience.

As such, the call for a new Youth International, is not a passive invitation to other political tendencies to undertake joint work but is a political challenge to the large centrist and reformist formations in the social movements. Put simply, we seek to win the masses of these organisations to our revolutionary programme and to demonstrate the superiority of it through struggle against capitalism and for its overthrow. In this sense, the slogan for an independent, revolutionary youth international that can unite all young people struggling against capitalism, is objectively revolutionary in the same way as the slogan for independent organisation was in 1920. That is, it provides a means by which young people can be won, en masse, to the historic programme of the working class and away from the movement's mis-leaderships.

A new youth international could organise the mass action necessary to take the struggle against capitalism forward and give it a strategic political direction towards another world, a communist world. It could leave the right wing academic milieu isolated and unable to mislead the movement. In galvanising a mass of young people in political struggle, it could provide the political leadership for the entire movement.

As such, the formation of a revolutionary youth international can actually lead to the development of new revolutionary parties. By recruiting first hundreds, and then thousands, to their ranks, by agitating for a new international political organisation of young people in struggle against capitalism, the revolutionary youth organisations can then go on to hold congresses, working with other working class forces that share the same goal, for the foundation of new revolutionary parties and, indeed, the Fifth International.

This model provides us not only with a principled, dynamic and historically grounded understanding of the relationship between the youth organisation and the revolutionary party: it also opens up the prospect of a contemporary path to the new combat organisations, the new world party of social revolution that we so urgently need, one which we can realistically travel in the period ahead.

Footnotes

1 V.I Lenin, Collected Works Vol. 23, London, 1974 p.164

2 *ibid*,

3 Third International, *Theses, Resolutions and Manifestos of the First Four Congresses*, London, 1983, p.232

4 *ibid*

5 L.D.Trotsky, *‘Toward a revolutionary youth organisation?’*, *Writings, 1938-9*, New York, 1974, pp.121-2

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