

Opportunists and sectarians on Iran

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From Workers Power issue 4 by Dave Stockton - an analysis of the positions of the IMG (Fourth International) and the Spartacist league on the Iranian revolution

The International Marxist Group

The United Secretariat of the Fourth International (USEC), and their record of opportunism with regard to the Iranian revolution, will prove a fatal guide to its followers in Iran.

The position they have argued is identical to that of the Mensheviks in pre-revolutionary Russia who argued, against Lenin and the Bolsheviks, that the workers movement should focus on the struggle for bourgeois democratic demands aiming later to utilise the freedoms afforded by bourgeois democracy to build a workers party in preparation for the next stage of the historical process-the struggle for socialism.

In September Tariq Ali outlined the 'key tasks' of the fight to overthrow the Shah as -"the establishment of a republic, restoration of trade unions and political parties, free elections on the basis of universal adult franchise to elect a Constituent Assembly in order to draft a constitution, total nationalization of all the oil and multinational companies."

Ali calls for a bourgeois, not a workers republic. All the measures cited are bourgeois-democratic and the Constituent Assembly is to finalise the bourgeois revolution, to give it constitutional form.

The excuses advanced for the Muslim clergy by Socialist Challenge were introduced with an analogy from a bourgeois revolution - "Charles I too was overthrown by a movement which spoke with a religious voice". The most Socialist Challenge can muster is a sly wink in the direction of 'something more' than a bourgeois revolution taking place in Iran-"such a dynamic will pave the way for more lasting and fundamental changes."

Is this just a quirk of the editorial offices of Socialist Challenge? Not at all. In an interview with Iranian Trotskyists on 12th October 1978 we find as the sole statement of aims "Iranian revolutionaries must call for the overthrow of the Pahlavi monarchy; its replacement by a republic, and the establishment of a constituent assembly freely elected through universal suffrage." In an editorial statement on Iran' (Socialist Challenge 9.11.1978) which was made after the eruption of the massive anti-Shah strike wave the BIG dropped a few gentle hints that a bourgeois revolution was not all that was at stake "Even the most far reaching bourgeois democracy is unlikely to satisfy the needs of the masses... there is the possibility of the masses developing their own organizations of workers power-not simply to get rid of their present ruler, but to seize their own destiny once and for all. '

But, these wisecracks continue "The only thing we can predict with scientific accuracy is that 'everything is possible' " Such 'scientific accuracy' bears as much resemblance to 'scientific socialism' as Old Moore's Almanac does to Trotsky's 'Permanent Revolution',

The Iranian workers took our 'scientists' by such surprise as to force them in the direction of calling for soviets and workers power. But one week later Socialist Challenge was equivocating again. While soviets may be "the most favourable development" the "vital part of our armoury" for the IMG remained the "overthrow of the monarchy, immediate elections, convocation of a Constituent Assembly and freedom to form political parties and trade unions." (SC 16.11'78)

Socialism, proletarian revolution soviets are for the IMG's possible 'favourable development'. Revolutionaries should no doubt produce propaganda about them. But the centre-piece of the IMG/ USFI's agitation is "a number of interrelated democratic slogans" centring on the Constituent Assembly. (SC 14.12, 1978)

What these 'Trotskyists' fail to understand is that soviets and the proletarian revolution are not gifts of the historical process in the absence of which revolutionaries make do with bourgeois democracy. They are the strategic goal to which revolutionaries gear all their tactics.

Nowhere in the IMG/USFI's material do we even find a clear statement that to be successful in its bourgeois-democratic and anti-imperialist tasks the Iranian Revolution must become a proletarian revolution. All the experience of the major revolutionary upheavals from the First World War underlines the fact that 'democracy' is not a consolation prize for a failed revolution. The outcome is almost certainly bloody repression and military dictatorship. A situation like Weimar Germany or Portugal at present is the most 'favourable' alternative to such repression and, without a renewed and successful proletarian struggle for power; it will prove but a preparation for it.

With a rosy assurance that 'at least' the Iranian revolution will guarantee democracy the IMG/ USFI has started to count its electoral chickens before they have even hatched. They can ignore, or reduce to asides, the tasks of centralising the workers strike committees into soviets, of calling for an armed workers militia, for the preparation of an insurrection to smash the Generals control of the army, for absolute working class independence from the Mullahs and opposition to their plans for an Islamic Republic. Trusting to the Constituent Assembly to institutionalise democratic rights, they see the key task as "to take full advantage of them in terms of developing a socialist press, trade unions and preparing a powerful electoral intervention "in the manner of FOCEP in Peru. (Socialist Challenge 18.11979).

As the Mensheviks before them the Socialist Challenge editors have their eyes fixed on an electoral intervention after the successful bourgeois revolution not on a programme for the struggle for workers power.

The International Spartacist Tendency

The International Spartacist Tendency's position on Iran is living proof that a sectarian response to opportunism leads to errors as bad if not worse than those of the USE. Starting from a need to contradict the SWP(US) and the Iranian Student milieu the Spartacists raised the slogans "Down with the Shah! Down with the Mullahs!" Positively delighted by the outrage of Iranians-Moslem and socialist, a fact witnessed by their insulting epithet 'Mullah lovers', and the chortles of delight about Iranians 'driven to absolute frenzy by our slogans' the Spartacists started on the slippery slope to complete abstention from the struggle against the Shah, worse to an endorsement of their own ruling class's propaganda.

The Spartacists make a series of charges against the Mullah led opposition as a result of which they characterise the movement as one of 'clerical reaction'. A number of these charges amount to uncritical retailing of the chauvinist rubbish which filled the American press throughout the autumn. The Mullahs they claim wish to restore Iran to the 7th century AD, to the period of "the expansion of Islam by fire and the sword." They wish to introduce savage Islamic law punishments - stoning, public hanging and whipping

etc. They wish to enforce the wearing of the veil and the removal of the rights given to women by the Shah. To this list they add Khomeini's appetite to slaughter the working class militants on the pattern of the Indonesian mullahs in 1965. They cite his 'hatred of western civilization' quoting as fact that the 'Islamic Republic' will be simply a brutal military dictatorship.

The Spartacists do not restrict their venom to the mullahs. They see the masses participating in this movement as total dupes, with an appetite for genocide. "But you have to look at the slogans of the movement, restore the clerical lands, restore the veil, ban everything that sort of represents Western Progress, expel the foreign workers. In terms of the indigenous national minorities it could only be intensely genocidal in appetite." (Workers Vanguard 5.1.1979). Khomeini may well harbour some or all of these desires. Certainly some mullahs undoubtedly do. Reservations do have to be made however even here; Shi'ia Islam explicitly allows re-interpretation by the ulemas of the canonical teachings of Islam. Khomeini - although he opposed the Shah's reforms on Muslim divorce in 1967 has recently told a visiting delegation of women that he would not bring back polygamy; "One wife is enough" he remarked. (Time 5.2.1979). Also among his disciples in Paris were a number of unveiled women, and despite the recrudescence of veil-wearing (in itself an act of defiance against the Shah's regulation outlawing it) it is plainly untrue that the movement is explicitly for the return of women to the seclusion of the home and their submission to barbaric punishments. Such a movement could hardly draw into street protests and confrontation with the troops vast numbers of women veiled and unveiled.

As for the national and religious minorities as we have warned an Islamic Republic is likely to prove a severe threat to their rights and liberties but it is wrong to say the movement at present is consciously aimed at them. Large contingents of Jews and Azerbaijanis took part in the demonstrations in January and were loudly cheered by the crowd. Afghan workers' homes have been guarded against pogromists whipped up by Bakhtiar's campaign against 'communist Immigrants' and the call for foreign workers to get out was raised by Arab speaking workers in the oil fields against the highly paid English and American (overseers and 'experts'). Other charges are similarly gross distortions worthy of the capitalist yellow press. Khomeini, the Spartacists tell us, "wishes to restore feudal privileges, to restore the church lands to this parasitical caste." (WV 5.1.1979). Khomeini has uttered no statement about undoing the land reform and his peasant supporters would be more than surprised to hear it.

Why do the Spartacists have to retail this collection of half-truths and unsubstantiated claims? The answer is simple; they wish to abstain from support of the mass struggle against the Shah. When they say 'Down with the Shah!' they in fact include a proviso-only if it is the workers led by communists who do it. They oppose absolutely any military co-operation with the non-proletarian oppositionists. This position would mean abstention from the demonstrations, from the confrontations with the troops (called 'suicidal' in Workers Vanguard ? 15.12.1978). In the event of an uprising and barricade fighting between the army and the people it would again mean abstention. To justify this absurd and reactionary position the Spartacists have gone all the way to whitewashing the Shah himself. "What we need is a party that can transcend this kind of national chauvinism and counter pose a proletarian class axis to the current instability. In the absence of that one could more easily justify giving support to the Shah, as the Soviet Union clearly is doing, than to these Muslim clerical reactionaries, because if they are able to consolidate power all the evidence is it could only be worse than Indonesia for the working class, for the peasants for the nations!, minorities and the women." (Workers Vanguard 5.1.1979) (Our emphasis, WP)

Let us assume that the Spartacists do not wish to become 'State Department Socialists', then how do they end up with these absurd and shameful positions? Basically they leave Imperialism out of account. For them a direct military intervention is the sole condition under which the opposition could be given military support. The Shah, installed by a CIA engineered coup and supported by thousands of CIA and military

advisors is an agent of American and British Imperialism.

The American 'advisors' enjoy extra-territorial status in Iran. American capital exploits Iran, drawing super profits from its oil, from its industry and from agriculture. Iran is in Lenin's terms a semi-colony. The masses, despite all their illusions, are struggling against this Imperialism. If the USE draw from this the conclusion that working class can simply tail the mullahs if they refuse to pose the central need for working class independence and leadership then the Spartacists turn this on its head. The mullahs are simply reactionary-identical to reactionary petit bourgeois movements in Imperialist countries like the Poijjadists in France.

Whilst we in no way hide that the positive goals of the mullahs are not and cannot be those of the working class we do argue that Trotskyists must participate in the actions against the Shah and the Generals. Whilst arguing for proletarian independence in strategic goals (workers and peasants republic) for consistent democratic demands (including secularisation), for proletarian tactics (mass strike, workers militia, winning over the rank and file of the army, for the armed insurrection, the workers must be willing to 'strike together' with the mullahs, bazaaris, students, peasants etc, i.e. to form a de facto anti-imperialist military united front. In Trotsky's words "We do not solidarise ourselves for a moment with the illusions of the masses; but we must utilize whatever is progressive about these illusions to the utmost, otherwise we are not revolutionists but contemptible pedants." (Trotsky on Spain)

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