



Revolutionary tactics towards reformism

Mon, 30/05/1983 - 10:59

The onset of crisis has, historically, always been accompanied by working class struggle to defend past gains and to maintain living standards. Success in such struggles will severely limit the ability of the bourgeoisie to force the working class to pay the cost of the crisis.

As in periods of expansion, revolutionaries must intervene in such struggles, arguing for even the most partial and defensive demands to be fought for with those methods of direct action and the democratic involvement of the largest possible number of workers that can both win the struggle and prepare the class politically and organisationally for the period ahead.

Successful prosecution of such struggles, however, does not lead, of itself, to the development of revolutionary consciousness. Such a belief is the hallmark of economism. Revolutionaries cannot content themselves with merely arguing for better and more effective ways of winning the spontaneous demands of the workers.

Even where such demands have a progressive content (which is not always the case) it is the duty of revolutionaries to link the struggle for them to the historic mission of the proletariat, the conquest of state power. Such a linking is only possible through the use of transitional demands, demands that meet the real and central needs of the workers and that clash with the attempts of the capitalists and their state to make the workers pay the cost of the crisis.

The system of transitional demands advanced by communists, raising as it does the struggle for workers' control exercised through organs of struggle such as soviets and factory committees, organises the working class for, and leads it towards, the struggle for the conquest of state power.

Necessarily the struggle of the working class for either immediate or transitional demands brings it into potential conflict with the established reformist leaders. Such leaders are torn between their commitment to capitalism and their need to retain the leadership of the workers' organisations.

Every step they take to keep ahead of the workers tends to generate yet greater hopes and demands which go beyond what a bourgeois workers' party (or a bourgeois workers' government) can fulfil. Equally, in the course of struggles, new leaders, often of a militant left reformist variety are thrown up. While different tactics may be necessary in relation such leaders, they are not qualitatively different from the entrenched, conservative bureaucracy.

They reflect the consciousness of the workers who elect them. As such they represent, and become the means of maintaining, the reformist limitations of the consciousness of these workers. Trotsky pointed out this fact in relation to the Labour and trade union lefts in Britain in the 1920s: "The left-wingers reflect the discontent of the British working class.

As yet it is ill-defined, and they express its profound and persistent endeavour to break away from Baldwin-MacDonald in left-oppositional phrases entailing no obligations whatsoever. They transform the political helplessness of the awakening masses into an ideological maze. They constitute an expression of the forward move, but also act as a brake on it."

To advance workers' consciousness beyond that embodied in their choice of reformist leaders, it is vital that revolutionaries address tactics towards these leaders. Only if the inadequacies of the leaders, of both left and right

varieties, can be understood by workers in the course of struggle, will they be overcome.

Wherever significant sections of workers are led by non-revolutionaries it is necessary for communists not only to demand that they mobilise their members in pursuit of existing working class aims, but also to raise other immediate and transitional demands necessitated by the struggle. In no case should the impression be given that non-revolutionary leaders can be relied upon to carry out such demands.

This tactic has three aims. Firstly, to put the leaders to the test in front of their own members. Secondly, to popularise the demands that best meet the interests of the working class. Thirdly, to show the necessity for a decisive class wide battle with the bourgeoisie. The correct application of this method carries with it the potential not only of shattering illusions in particular reformists but in reformism per se, thereby opening up the possibility of winning the workers to an alternative revolutionary leadership.

However even in the worst crisis there is no purely objective or automatic process that leads to revolutionary consciousness. If an alternative, revolutionary leadership and strategy does not triumph then defeat and demoralisation will either restore the reformist leaders to control over a tamed and broken membership or, in extreme cases, the bourgeoisie may be able to destroy the legal workers' organisations completely. The dialectic of class struggle poses the possibility of the workers' movement raising itself to a revolutionary level in terms of leadership, organisation and tactics.

However, if the resolution of the clash between proletariat and bourgeoisie does not occur at this higher level, then it must occur at a lower level. The struggle will be resolved in the interests of the bourgeoisie. Thus, although social democracy suffered grievous blows during the great period of crisis between the imperialist world wars, inept tactics by revolutionaries, vacillations by centrists and then criminal sabotage by the Stalinist bureaucracy allowed the reformists to rise rejuvenated from the ground whence the crisis and the class struggle had hurled them.

Reformism was moribund, yet the forces of revolution were unable to dispatch it into the abyss. This reveals the extreme danger of all simplistic schemas for the development of revolutionary consciousness. All of these, from the most evolutionary and gradualist to the most catastrophist throw onto the "objective process" what are really the tasks of revolutionaries. Such schematism is an infallible sign of centrism vis-a-vis the reformist leaders: "For it has always been centrism which has cloaked the sins of opportunism with solemn references to the objective tendencies of development . . . but in actual fact, expressed in this alleged revolutionary objectivism is merely an effort to shirk revolutionary tasks by shifting them onto the shoulders of the so-called historical process."

Such schematism can be seen clearly among the modern centrists, even though they claim adherence to Trotsky's ideas. The catastrophism of the Gerry Healy tradition, typified in the documents and outlook of the International Committee, is but an early and primitive form of the objectivism that characterised the Pablo-Mandel wing of "Trotskyism" within the International Secretariat.

According to this current capitalism is, and has been for 40 years, on the edge of a disaster. The workers are boiling with revolutionary consciousness and only a thin layer, the reformist leaders, are holding back the masses from their appointed alternative, the revolutionary party. This latter has to be built, from the start, with all the apparatus and self-advertisement of a mass party, in readiness for the catastrophe. The workers can then simply join the party en masse and be freed from illusions.

Thus the tactics for overcoming reformism in action, embodied in the united front, rust away unused whilst what is in fact -despite all its self-advertisement - still a propaganda group, degenerates into a sect and from thence into a cult, wrapped in a cloud of idealist dialectics and self-mystification. This was the case history of Healy's "Workers Revolutionary Party".

The alternative schema, characteristic of the Mandel wing of the degenerate fragments of Trotskyism, is to seek to assist the process of world revolution by acting as organisers and attorneys for the left-centrist and left-reformist

leaders. These leaders must be encouraged because they embody the forward march of history. Centrist schematism and "objectivism" can lead to both sectarian and opportunist conclusions within one and the same political grouping.

It led, for example, to the Healy grouping accommodating to Bevanism in the early 1950s and to party-proclamation hysterics in the 1970s. Similarly the British Mandelites' attitude to the Labour Party oscillated from "Let it Bleed" and threats to physically disrupt its election meetings in 1969 to abject grovelling before Benn in the early 1980s.

The conclusions appear as opposites but the underlying method is the same. In offering to working class militants either the evolutionary transformation of the reformist parties or "building the Party" (i.e. joining the sect) both variants of centrism are completely useless to workers confronted with the need, here and now, to fight within reformist organisations and alongside reformist workers.

Revolutionary communists do not merely offer their alternative programme like a magic talisman, they utilise tactics, tactics which are, at one and the same time, the tactics necessary to win class battles and the tactics necessary to overcome reformism. Such tactics can only be developed on the basis of the living experience of the class struggle.

For this reason they received their fullest codification during the period of the most intense conflict between communism and capitalism. This took place in the years immediately following the first seizure of state power by a communist led proletariat, the Russian Revolution of October 1917.

In their struggle for power in Russia the Bolsheviks were confronted by a twofold task. The dynamic of the class struggle had led to the creation, by the workers, of the Soviets, organs of struggle based on the direct democracy of the working class. Within the Soviets, however, the majority of workers' delegates did not, initially, recognise the need for revolution.

This ensured that leadership of the Soviets and, therefore, of the working class, fell to the Mensheviks who-unlike the working class-were consciously opposed to revolution.

The Bolsheviks, therefore, had both to reveal to the masses the ultimately anti-working class nature of Menshevism and the need for working class revolution. The tactics of the Bolsheviks, summed up in the slogans "All Power to the Soviets" and "Break with the Bourgeoisie", were aimed at allowing the masses of the working class to learn, through their own experience of the struggle, that the conquest of state power alone could resolve their problems and that the Mensheviks would do everything in their power to prevent this.

The Bolsheviks convinced the workers of what they needed-Soviet power as the means to achieving "Peace, Bread and Land", and of the need to demand that those leaders who said they were committed to the working class and the Soviets actually carried out this policy. Through this, the contradiction between the rapidly developing political class consciousness of the workers and the hold of the Mensheviks over them (itself predicated on the former lack of political class consciousness) was strained to breaking point.

In the heat of the revolution, this method of combating the reformist leaders, and enabling the masses to overcome their own reformist consciousness, was neither codified nor generalised. Yet the tactics of agitating for mass action and demanding that the reformist leaders support and lead such action as long as they maintain the confidence of the majority of workers, were repeatedly utilised by the Bolsheviks. It was this practice that the early Comintern crystallised into the complex of tactics known as the united front.

Source URL: <https://fifthinternational.org/content/revolutionary-tactics-towards-reformism>