Building the Party - A parody of Leninism

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One stick that SWP members repeatedly beat the rest of the left with is that they alone are "building the party". Every week in Socialist Worker a column records the week?s new recruits and urges more to join the revolutionary party.

Many books from the SWP stable - Volume One of Cliff?s *Lenin* and Chris Harman?s *The Lost Revolution* to name but two - have as their theme the centrality of the party for the making of the revolution. Despite this breastbeating and dogged repetition of truisms, the IS/SWP have never understood the real nature of a revolutionary party on the Leninist model, let alone come close to building one.

In the days before Tony Cliff became a ?Leninist? he openly espoused a Luxemburgist model of the revolutionary party. That is, he argued for a non-cadre, non-vanguard party, a party of the whole working class, organised on a federalist - as opposed to democratic centralist - basis. The first edition of his, subsequently doctored, pamphlet on Luxemburg stated:

"For Marxists, in the advanced industrial countries, Lenin?s original position can much less serve as a guide than Rosa Luxemburg's, not withstanding her overstatement on the question of spontaneity." (1959 edition Rosa Luxemburg [1]).

Even after his supposed conversion to Leninism in 1968-69, Cliff?s attachment to spontaneist notions of the party persisted as, for example, when he argued that Luxemburg?s position was superior to Lenin?s 1902-04 position "which was copied and given an added bureaucratic twist by Stalinists the world over". (1969 edition of Rosa Luxemburg [2]). In plain language Cliff is attributing the monoliths created by Stalinism to the model developed by the early Bolshevik Party.

The shift to a ?Leninist? model of organisation by the Cliff group came in 1968-69. Cliff justified his previous federalist position on the grounds that the IS had been a propaganda group and "all branches were like the beads on a string". (Neither Washington nor Moscow, Cliff, p.215). However, the shift to more agitational activity, he argued, necessitated a shift to democratic centralism.

The second justification for the shift was the defeat of the French general strike in May 1968. Cliff had empirically registered that a spontaneous mass strike (the biggest ever in Europe) had not produced the revolution. The reason had been the absence of a combat, that is, a ?Leninist? party.

Both pretexts were based on an empirical method. Neither accounted for the actual shift in position in the Luxemburg pamphlet. The doctoring of the text (Cliff?s right) was not in any way acknowledged or accounted for (Cliff?s deceitfulness). As such the new turn to"the party" was not the result of a real understanding of the essence of the Leninist model. It was based on copying - and distorting - the organisational form of that model.

Since their turn to ?Leninism? the SWP tradition has developed a standard explanation of the need for a
party. For example, Cliff wrote, in "Lenin and the Revolutionary Party":

"For the achievement of a socialist revolution a revolutionary party is needed because of the uneven levels of culture and consciousness in different groups of workers. If the working class were ideologically homogeneous there would be no need for leadership." (IS 58 [8], p10)

This leaves out of account the question of political consciousness, the ideas about society, the state and so on which are held by the workers. If the class were ideologically homogeneous on the basis of wrong ideas, for example reformism, nationalism or even racism, there would obviously still be a need for communists to fight for the leadership of the class.

This would have to be done in such a way as to break workers from these ideas and win them to revolutionary communism. The crucial question is whether the working class can develop a revolutionary consciousness out of its own struggles. Cliff argues that it can; the problem is that different workers reach such consciousness at different times.

In What is to be done? Lenin argued most forcibly that the spontaneous ideology of the working class was trade unionism and that this meant "enslavement by the bourgeoisie". The role of the party, argued Lenin, was to bring scientific socialism into the working class.

Of course, even in the supposedly one-sided What is to be done? Lenin recognised that the workers did spontaneously gravitate towards socialism, but the tasks of the party were to conquer and subordinate this spontaneity in order to transform it into revolutionary consciousness.

The SWP have made much of Lenin?s later comment that What is to be done? suffered from being a one-sided polemic against economism. Molyneux, following Cliff, argues that:

"If we accept Lenin?s formulation that revolutionary consciousness has to be brought into the working class then precious little is left of Marx?s fundamental dictum that 'the emancipation of the working class is the act of the working class itself'. On the contrary, the role of the working class would be a strictly subordinate one." (Marxism and the Party, p48)

This argument fails to understand either Lenin?s original argumentation or the one-sidedness that Lenin later identified.

What Molyneux wants is not to correct a certain polemical one-sidedness but to deny any validity in Lenin?s position. Molyneux believes that the spontaneous struggle can achieve revolutionary socialist consciousness:

"Indeed it was from the insurgent workers of Paris that Marx learned that the working class cannot simply take over the existing state machine but must smash it." (ibid, p50)

In addition he cites the Chartists, the Russian workers of 1905 and similar examples of major working class political struggles to ?prove? his point. Molyneux is merely parroting Cliff when he argues this. Indeed Cliff argues that Lenin reversed his 1902 position in 1905:

"Lenin had to protect his followers from allegiance to What is to be done? His formulation there of the relationship between spontaneity and organisation still bedevils the movement. Yet in 1905 he clearly reversed his position: 'The working class is instinctively, spontaneously social-democratic . . .'." (IS Journal May 1973 - the break in the quota is Cliff's)

Here Cliff is not simply purblind - he is wilfully twisting Lenin?s actual position. The quotation above is
much fuller and Lenin is more careful than Cliff suggests. Lenin points to the fact that in the 1905 upheavals the workers were fighting "in a purely Social Democratic spirit" because:

"The working class is instinctively, spontaneously Social Democratic, and more than ten years of work put in by Social Democracy has done a great deal to transform this spontaneity into consciousness." (Lenin, "The Reorganisation of the Party" [4], Collected Works vol 10, p32)

Far from being a change of position, this was entirely consistent with Lenin?"s 1902 view that:

"It is often said that the working class spontaneously gravitates towards socialism. This is perfectly true in the sense that socialist theory reveals the causes of the misery of the working class more profoundly and more correctly than any other theory and for this reason the workers are able to assimilate it so easily, provided however this theory does not itself yield to spontaneity, provided it subordinates spontaneity to itself." (What is to be done? [5])

The SWP?"s failure to understand the relationship between spontaneity and consciousness lies at the root of their false notion of the party. Take the examples, cited by Molyneux, of the Chartists, the Communards and the workers in the Soviets. These workers did not raise themselves to the level of revolutionary communist consciousness.

Certainly it was the Commune which provided Marx with the historical experience from which he - the revolutionary communist--generalised the theory of the state. That generalisation, which is essential for the development of a revolutionary strategy, was not made by the Communards, who were not led by communists.

Similarly the first Soviets, in 1905, did not raise the call for armed insurrection against Tsarism. The Bolsheviks did, and in Moscow they won workers to that position. Equally, it was the experience of 1905 which, much later, was generalised into a revolutionary strategy, "All power to the Soviets!", by Lenin.

Their inability to understand the primary role of the party as the ideological vanguard of the class means that for the SWP the party plays a primarily organisational role. It simply links up existing struggles. Molyneux argues:

"The fact of workers achieving socialist consciousness spontaneously does not entail a return to the social-democratic gradualist view [of the party] for this consciousness does not develop gradually, accumulating steadily and inevitably. So the consciousness of the advanced socialist workers must be organised and centralised to increase to the maximum its influence within the ideologically heterogeneous class as a whole." (Marxism and the Party, p50)

To argue against this idea is not, of course, to deny that the party does have a very important organisational role to play. However, if the ideological role, the role of political leadership, is ignored, then the precise nature of the organisational one is equally ignored. In order to fight effectively against capitalism and the capitalist state, particular forms of organisation of the working class are needed. What those forms are, for example, revolutionary trade unions, soviets, militias, etc, can be learnt from past and present struggles. But that is no guarantee that the working class will adopt them spontaneously or that it will adopt them in time.

The lessons of past battles have to be brought into today?"s struggle because they have either been forgotten by today?"s generation or have never been learned. If the party does not argue for the correct forms of organisation and methods of struggle (tactics) and against insufficient or wrong ideas then those wrong ideas that is, bourgeois ideas, will dominate.
The direct consequence of viewing the party merely as the “generaliser”, the weapon simply for the linking up of struggles, is a rejection of the idea of a cadre party. Consonant with his early positions on Luxemburg, Cliff has always (falsely) counterposed the broad mass party to the supposedly elitist vanguard party. For the IS/SWP, therefore, party building means opening the door to the masses on a minimal basis.

Ian Birchall defended this line in his history of the party in the following terms:

"As had always been the practice in IS, the aim was to win recruits to the organisation on the basis of a minimum agreement on activity and leave the question of education and the wider aspects of IS politics to be developed in the process of work inside the organisation." ("Building the Smallest Mass Party in the World" 1951-1979 [6])

He goes on to admit that many recruits were soon lost - he does not explain why - but insists:

"But there was no way this could be forecast in advance, no magic mark engraved on the foreheads of potential recruits."

This is disgraceful. It is a recipe for deceiving recruits, diluting the political level of the organisation, leaving new recruits passive and politically untrained, and demoralising members.

It deceives people by recruiting them on minimal grounds rather than on the real politics of the organisation. It dilutes the organisation by bringing in members who are not aware of the basis or principles of Marxism, leaving them prey to demagogues, personal prejudices and manipulation by those who are “in the know”. It demoralises members because they have not been prepared for the real political tasks facing Marxists, not trained to swim against the stream. It is a recipe for a pliant membership accustomed to accepting the line from above rather than taking part in the internal discussion, debate and criticism that is the lifeblood of a genuine democratic centralist party.

Precisely because a Leninist party aims to lead, any group trying to build such a party must be selective in its recruitment. It has to select, train and recruit people who can stay the course, people who in their fields of work have the ability to lead others. In other words, before it can become a mass party, and in order to become a mass party, the party has to be a cadre party.

Cliff justifies the rejection of a cadre party on the grounds that it is inherently substitutionist. His essay "Trotsky on substitutionism", written in 1960 and republished as recently as 1982, expresses this libertarian view of the party. He argues that there was a causal relationship between the Bolshevik organisation and counter-revolutionary Stalinism:

"However, if the state built by the Bolshevik Party reflected, not only the will of the party but of the total social reality in which the Bolsheviks found themselves, one should not draw the conclusion that there was no causal connection at all between Bolshevik centralism based on hierarchy of professional revolutionaries and the Stalinism of the future." (Trotsky on Substitutionism [7])

He quotes Trotsky’s Menshevik position against Lenin approvingly. Trotsky wrote:

“The organisation of the party substitutes itself for the party as a whole, then the central committee substitutes itself for the organisation; and finally the ‘dictator’ substitutes himself for the central committee.”

Cliff comments:

"In Trotsky’s words about the danger of ‘substitutionism’ inherent in Lenin’s conception of the party
organisation and his plea against uniformity, one can see his prophetic genius, his capacity to look ahead, to bring into a unified system every facet of life."

**The problem of substitutionism**

For Cliff, the Leninist conception of the democratic centralist party is inherently substitutionist. By saying this he is giving support to every anti-communist philistine who argues that Stalin simply took over and continued the work of the party of Lenin!

It is quite clear that, for Cliff, a Leninist party without a Lenin to run it is a dangerous monolith. Why else praise Trotsky's "prophetic genius" instead of making clear Trotsky's gross misconception. It was not the cadre organisation that was substitutionist, but the political programme of the Stalinists after Lenin's death.

They substituted reliance on the Kuomintang and British TUC officials for the building of a revolutionary party and the political independence of the working class. The reason Cliff ignores this real substitutionism is because for him the question of leadership in a programmatic sense is irrelevant.

Ironically, Cliff's distortion of the Leninist party leads to substitutionism in the SWP. Real democratic centralism requires a real internal party life, an educated and involved membership and an accountable leadership. None of these things exist in the SWP. The leadership's centrist precludes democratic centralism.

The established Cliffite leadership cannot afford to risk training a membership that could hold them to account. The history of expulsions and purges are eloquent testimonies of this. The result is a high turnover of members, with the recruits from one period being sacrificed or demoralised during the next. This is a parody of democratic centralism. It substitutes the rule of the faction in the central committee for the real democratic centralist Leninist model.

This has been the situation in the SWP for many years. Each successive "turn" is accompanied by a significant loss of members who were recruited mainly, if not solely, on the practice of the preceding turn. Such comrades are accused of not being able to get out of the rut of routinism, of being conservative and too caught up in their own areas of work to be able to see the need for the party to reorientate.

In an immediate sense this may often be true but if this is the case then the fault lies primarily with the party leadership that allowed them to become routinist, single issue campaigners, not with the comrades themselves. Cliff's justification for this approach is based on the theory that the party is necessarily built by the leadership "bending the stick" in different directions as circumstances change.

Once more we find the quote-doctor Cliff enlisting Lenin as a supporter of party building via "bending the stick". Cliff argues:

"The readiness to bend the stick far in one direction and then to reverse and bend it far in the opposite direction, a characteristic he had throughout his life, took clear form already at this early stage of his development as a revolutionary leader."

And later on:

"He always makes clear the task of the day, repeating a thousand times what is needed, using the heaviest, thickest strokes to describe the tasks. Tomorrow, Lenin will recapture the balance, will unbend the stick and then bend it in another direction." ("From Marxist Circle to Agitation" [8], IS Journal 52, p22)

This picture of Lenin as the sole arbiter of the political practice of the Bolsheviks, the genius who twists and
turns his organisation as he thinks fit, again leaves out of account the political strategy that guided Lenin. It is obvious that any leader needs to be able to shift the emphasis and the focus of work. This is true of the Pope, Margaret Thatcher and Neil Kinnock. Lenin was able to do this extremely well and, it could be said, this made him a great leader, but it was not this that made him a great revolutionary leader.

It was his ability to fight for the communist programme, stemming from his role as a part of a highly developed and trained cadre party, in all sorts of very different circumstances that made him this. In fact his changes of strategy, that is, of programme, were quite rare: the realisation of the bankruptcy of the Second International and the need to call for a Third, the de facto jettisoning of the "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry" in favour of the strategy of permanent revolution after April 1917, for example.

In short, Cliff believes that a Leninist party is only healthy if there is a Lenin in charge. If there is, then the party leader or leadership, operates by being able to swing from one direction to another at will. As Rosa Luxemburg put it (in another context) the membership develop the passive virtue of obedience.

**Democratic centralism in the SWP**

Naturally, the leadership of the SWP has to pay lip service to the norms of democratic centralism. Chris Harman’s essay, "Party and Class", is a case in point. The fact that he can give an account of democratic centralism that is formally correct on many points only makes the organisation’s practical trampling underfoot of these norms all the more shameful.

In talking about the concept of discipline, for example, Harman writes:

"Discipline for Lenin does not mean hiding differences that exist within the party but rather exposing them to the full light of day so as to argue them out." (9)

However for such conscious discipline to exist, which means every comrade being convinced, through argument and debate, of the line of the organisation, there must exist a machinery within the organisation for conducting that argument and debate.

Yet the SWP does not have a regular internal bulletin in which the membership can air differences and expose them to the full light of day. It has three or four IBs in the weeks before a conference. Nor does the SWP accept the right of members who disagree with the line, and therefore, want to argue against it, to organise themselves as factions.

Such debate is essential and cannot be restricted, as in the SWP, to a “pre-conference period”. Political arguments do not conform to calendars, they are dictated by the course of events. By allowing only limited arguments against its chosen policy the leadership of the SWP ensures that it can prepare the membership to accept its position long in advance of any counter-argument. As a result the inner leadership acts, in fact, as a permanent faction. Not surprisingly it becomes ever more isolated from the pressure of the rank and file, and is increasingly restricted to the members of the apparatus of the organisation.

In every phase of its existence, the SWP Cliffites have got it wrong on the question of the party. On its role in the working class, its organisational principles and the criteria for membership, the SWP make fundamental mistakes and revisions. This why we attack them.

To the right of the SWP, Socialist Organiser (Now the AWL) and Socialist Outlook criticise them for raising the call to build a revolutionary alternative to Labour. That is not our criticism. We are 100% for the building
of a revolutionary party as an alternative to Labour.

What we insist is that the SWP have not done that and, crucially, cannot do it. Workers Power can. Join us and help to build it.

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