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MARXISM vs L.D. : Elements of a Dialogue

I want to deal here ~~more~~ specifically with the last third of LD's article, where he discusses aspects of our Spartacist League leaflet, "From Protest to Power". It is unfortunate that his summary of this leaflet is so inadequate.

The point of the leaflet is clear from its title: the antiwar movement should develop and transform its conception of itself from one of "protest" to that of an organized movement directly and aggressively seeking state power. The point was made there that until now demonstrations ~~summed~~ against the war in Vietnam, whether they are organized around the concept of "protest" or around "resistance", have "not only had no effect on governmental policy, but the escalation of the war appears to have coincided with each demonstration." This failure to have any effectiveness has led to a tremendous frustration among antiwar militants, and the furthering of more hysterical methods of opposition, those of "confrontation," etc.

Perhaps the crux of our position is here: "Personal sacrifice can never substitute for a mass movement", says the leaflet, "and it is necessary to understand this in developing a perspective for the antiwar movement." This is precisely the case. What is important is to understand the dynamics of the society which produced this war in order to find the means for ending it. There are many sectors of this society so discontented with their role in it that they can be brought to a revolutionary consciousness ~~about~~ -- the ghetto uprisings, a tremendous rash of militant strikes in wartime -- and it should be the function of the serious elements in the antiwar movement to link up with these potentially revolutionary sectors, in order to give direction and leadership to their revolt. The leaflet well ~~sums~~ sums up the meaning of this discontent:

"...it stems from the fundamentally oppressive character of American capitalism, of which the slaughter of the rebellious Vietnamese peasantry is simply the most dramatic external manifestation." (my italics)

The rest of the leaflet deals with the means by which this linkage can be made: the general strike, the welding of a ghetto-antiwar axis, a labor party. The final conception is this:

The anti-war movement can force Johnson to withdraw U.S. troops only if he is more afraid of it than of the victory of the Vietnamese revolution. No demonstration, however effective and militant, can do this. Only a movement capable of taking state power can. The anti-war movement has no future except as a force for building a party of revolutionary change.

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Since ~~LD~~ LD disagrees with the specific proposals we made in order to make practical our conception of a program for the antiwar movement, it of course follows that he rejects the fundamental program itself. He largely confines himself to criticizing various tactics we propose to implement this program. Let me deal with them here.

I. We can't have a political general strike, says LD. It is "mechanical", a "magic" way of solving problems, and further the "existing trade union bureaucracy" won't hear of such a thing. To which we make a direct reply: It isn't "magical", whatever you think you mean by that; China 1927 and Spain 1936, apart from having diametrically opposite meanings to each other (I always thought the uprising in 1936 was quite successful, by the way), have certainly nothing to do with this.

As far as LD's opposition to the tactic of the general strike because the "union bureaucrats" and the labor fakers goes: this objection was

omit with in the leaflet itself. Here is the relevant passage:

part from being a more effective form of protest, the proposed general strike would enable the anti-war movement to widen its base among forces other than political activists and particularly to strengthen organized anti-war sentiment among workers. It would be an excellent way for anti-war trade unionists to organize among their fellow workers and inject the war question into trade union politics. Since the trade union bureaucracy would certainly oppose it, the fight over the proposed strike would reinforce the increasing rank and file discontent in the unions. In fact, in many places, the strike would not only be around anti-war demands, but economic issues as well. It would then be a protest of general social discontent, and would help lay the basis for a mass revolutionary socialist party.

This is the tactic, as Lenin would say, of "setting the base against the base." The point is to throw off that bureaucracy, to get rid of the labor lieutenants of capital, the Johnson Labor Leaders, the Meanys, the Reuthers, etc. It is the fact that, in this particular case as in a number of others, LD appears so eager to "oppose" our position that he doesn't bother to make himself familiar with it.

III. On the question of Draft Resistance: we don't, as LD would have it, advocate "enlisting" or anything resembling it; as a matter of fact, we in the Spartacist League have ~~an~~ a policy of immediate expulsion for anyone inclined to pull anything of the sort. We think our people, and anti-war activists generally, are far more effective outside than in the army.

This really isn't such a difficult question. What we think is: if you are faced with immediate induction, if you can't get out of being drafted, then you will be far more useful ~~and~~ to the antiwar and radical movement in the army than in exile in Canada, "underground" or in jail. It is a question, primarily, of effectiveness. We do have members of the League in the army, and some of them have been able to do a surprising amount of agitation and antiwar work generally. Besides getting military training which will no doubt be of good use in the future.

But there are, of course, other ramifications. Draft resistance is not a new conception in this country; it existed, and on a mass base many times larger than now, during World War I. Read Ray Ginger's biography of Eugene Debs. But there is a pretty good reason why almost no one now knows of it. Not only was it totally ineffective in stopping the war, but it had the negative effect of keeping radicals apart from the masses of soldiers at the very time of the Russian Revolution and afterwards, when a tremendous revolutionary wave shook the world. Lenin's line--"Turn the imperialist war into a civil war, class against class"--~~xxxx~~ did more to stop that war than all the thousands of draft resisters in the jails.

More: the major reason the imperialists were unable to smash the new workers' state in Russia, in the immediate postwar years during the famine, civil war and intervention, was that they didn't and couldn't trust their troops. The mutinies in the French navy, in particular, were quite decisive, and this despite the fact that in most of the belligerent countries the socialists were more or less voluntarily in jail. Had they been out in public, or in the various armies, they might have been able and in a position to give radical leadership to the revolutionary disaffection of the soldiers, perhaps even to the extent of making the socialist revolution in a few of the capitalist countries.

We like Lenin's line, quoted above; we want to see it applied to the antiwar movement here. We think it will be more effective in stopping the war than holding up pictures of burned children for the edification of the Dow people will be.

There are a lot more reasons why we take the attitude we do toward the tactic of Draft Resistance, but I unfortunately have a space limitation.

III. I simply can't discuss the question of the need for a revolutionary party on ID's terms, for that matter, on his level; I can only say here that if he's serious in what he says, I would suggest he quit referring to himself as a "revolutionary Marxist." In this regard one might say of him what Trotsky said of Norman Thomas: "He calls himself a socialist through a total misconception of the meaning of the term."

Item: ID says the Cuban Revolution proves that the existence of a Leninist party is no longer a precondition for the making of the socialist revolution. I say, on the contrary, that the only thing the Cuban experience shows is that, within certain stringent limitations and in certain freak situations (ie, when the imperialists have their eyes fixed in another direction, and when the bourgeois state is virtually decomposed, like prerevolutionary Cuba or —possibly— today's Haiti) guerrillas, or some other kind of paramilitary organization, can seize power and initiate an limited, incomplete, bonapartist social revolution. As a matter of fact, the Transitional Program, upon which ID showers such abuse, anticipated as far back as 1930 the possibility of exactly such freak situations arising. In Cuba, perhaps, does ID, who claims to be sufficiently familiar ~~with~~ with this basic document of our movement to discard it and its lessons, really think such conditions prevail, or ever will prevail, in the United States? We have been talking about the U.S., haven't we?

Item: ID quotes Debray's Revolution in the Revolution? on the problem of the (inevitable?) bureaucratization of the "revolutionary" party. Is this supposed to be directed at me? Is he referring to all Leninist parties, all Trotskyist parties, the Spartacist League? I would say here that, apart from the fact that Debray in this passage is talking about the Stalinist parties of Latin America, whose function for at least the last 40 years ^{has been} to mislead and stop revolutionary movements, I would think he would be a little loath to quote Debray as an authority on anything in the light of the demise of the Debray weltanschauung in the person of Guevara. But the whole argument is ridiculous: because, say, Gus Hall and the CPUSA are a reformist bunch of miserable bureaucrats, it therefore follows that Lenin's greatest contribution to revolutionary Marxism, the vanguard combat party, is defunct!

I can't --I WON'T-- argue on that level.

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One last point: LD writes, presumably feeling he has dealt me a knockout blow:

" We too know Lenin's saying: "Without a revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary practice." But we also (also?!) believe what Fidel said: "The duty of a revolutionary is to make the revolution." "

Okay, fine: "The duty of the revolutionary is to make the revolution." It may surprise LD to hear that I pretty much myself agree with that slogan. But ...in that form it's inadequate and incomplete. Inadequate because it doesn't take certain factors into consideration; neither Marx nor Engels, nor Rosa Luxemburg nor Karl Liebknecht ever made a revolution, whereas both Tito and Hoxha did. Doesn't that suggest something to you, or do you think the latter two are the better, the only, revolutionaries of the six mentioned? Or perhaps I can quote LD against LD when he was telling me there was no need for the vanguard party because, "the liberation of the workers must be the worker's own job". Should we extend that line of Marx's to include the phrase, "unless of course Fidel Castro is on the scene, in which case he'll do the job for you."? LD is familiar with Marxist literature; may one suggest he dig out and reread Plekhanov's The Role of the Individual in History to counterbalance the rather large dose of Lebray he seems to have difficulty digesting?

The real question is, HOW do you make the Revolution? For openers, I'd suggest we raise seriously the question of the need for and the value of constructing the mightiest weapon of our epoch against the bourgeois state: the Leninist combat party.