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Debate

The future of the revolutionary left

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Alain Krivine, main spokesperson of the French Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire (LCR), spoke in July at the London 'Marxism' event, organised by the British Socialist Workers Party (SWP), on the 'future of the revolutionary left'. Here we publish his speech, together with the contribution made in the discussion by Alex Callinicos, an SWP leader. Krivine is a member of the European Parliament; Callinicos is secretary of the International Socialist Tendency (the international grouping in which the SWP participates) and the author of numerous books on Marxism. Readers will appreciate that the meeting took place well before the beginning of the war in Afghanistan.

ALAIN KRIVINE

"I think this debate today is very important for one main reason. For some years now we have seen a real development, sometimes even an upsurge, of new far left, anti-capitalist, and revolutionary organisations in many countries. We see also a radicalisation of the young generation. That means that after many years we can see 'the beginning of the beginning' of the exit from the 'tunnel' for the revolutionaries. That means that, confronted with this new development of far left organisations, we have very big responsibilities. It means the question is to know whether we are able to answer politically the questions posed by this new radicalisation in Europe.

The first thing is to discuss the reasons for this development, to see if it's only a temporary thing, or if it's the opposite - and I think so - a new long-term situation. I think there are four reasons which explain the new space for far left, revolutionary or anti-capitalist organisations.

First is the fall of the Berlin wall, in other words the total collapse of Stalinism. For us that's very important because Stalinism was a real obstacle, this terrible example of so-called 'socialism'. At the same time, with the collapse of Stalinism, for millions of workers there is the comprehension of the total collapse of social democracy. Europe today is more or less totally led by social democrats. Eleven countries out of 15 in the European Union are led by social democrats. I don't say there are no more illusions in social democracy or its capacity to solve the problems of the working class. But it's clear there is a change. You have seen in Britain the mass abstention among the working class and popular milieu in the general election, because millions of people have lost a part - I say a part - of their illusions in the ability of social democracy to solve their problems.

The second reason is, I think everyone agrees, that within the context of capitalist globalisation we are confronted with a fantastic bosses' offensive against the working class, with exactly the same effects in many countries - privatisation of public services, 'flexibility', the attack against the conditions of life of the working class, even when people are working they have worse conditions of work, the development of racism and so on.

The third reason is that the mass workers' parties, the social democrats and the Communists in the countries where they were strong, are going more and more to the right - if that is possible. So today we can speak in a certain sense of the 'social liberalisation' of the social democrats and the 'social democratisation' of the Communists, in France and Italy and other places in Europe.

Institutionalisation

And even if they are not part of the workers movement, we see also today a kind of 'institutionalisation' of the Greens. It's important to notice that because I suppose here, like in France, at a certain time young people had the feeling that the Greens were very on the left, they were radical and so on. And now they are in the government in France, Germany and Belgium and concretely people see that in fact they are totally integrated, even if in some speeches they could appear more on the left sometimes.

The fourth reason is that if the traditional workers' organisations are going to the right, among the working class and especially among the youth we have a left social and political radicalisation. We have now in many countries, not all countries of course, very strong, combative strikes. For example in Greece today, where you have general strikes with very strong demonstrations in the streets. You have these kind of very radical strikes in France, especially in the private sector, which is new - in the past the private sector was not very active, for many reasons which you know.

Confronted with this new social and political radicalisation and the upsurge of a new generation among the working class, we can speak about a new development of anti-capitalist consciousness among the young generation. In this the movement against capitalist globalisation is key. I don't say that this movement, which is more and more important with mass street demonstrations - Seattle, Prague, Nice, Gothenburg and at the end of the month in Genoa - is made up in the main of revolutionaries. That would be stupid. The important thing is that this movement, made up overwhelmingly of young people, is fighting against the consequences, the dramatic consequences, of capitalism. And this slogan which appears on the walls today - "our world is not for sale" - in fact is really an anti-capitalist slogan. For all these reasons, there is a new space for extreme left and anti-capitalist organisations.

In many countries in Europe today you have new anti-capitalist organisations. And usually they are built with similar features. You know better than me the Scottish Socialist Party. In the same framework is the Socialist Alliance. If you look at countries like Portugal, Denmark, Greece, Turkey and France - maybe France is a bit different - you have in all these countries the convergence of political groups and tendencies with different traditions. People coming from Trotskyism (sometimes different wings of Trotskyism, and as you know we are very rich in this!), from Maoism, from the crisis of the old Communist parties, even people from libertarian traditions. You have the beginning of regroupment of people from these different traditions, who agree not to discuss the past. Of course discussion of the past is very important, but I think today to build a new anti-capitalist organisation together it's not necessary to have the same opinion about the nature of the Soviet Union seventy years ago.

Of course as Trotskyists we consider these historical debates to be very important, but we have to look to the future, and today the main thing for us is to regroup people if they agree what to do today, even if they disagree about the analysis of the past. And it's not just people who have been in different organisations, but also people who have never been in a political party, but who are today activists in the trade union movement, the social movements, anti-racist and anti-fascist movements, women's movements and ecologist movements - and who are today waiting for a political answer to the problems confronting them in their daily social and political life.

Left Bloc

In Portugal you have an organisation called the Left Bloc, composed of the Fourth International organisation, a split from the Communists and the UDP, a former Maoist organisation which was very strong during the Portuguese 1974-5 revolution.

Now this organisation has decided to open membership to individuals who are not members of any of these organisations. Today they have around 2,000 people, with two parliamentary deputies. And now it's really a big organisation among the youth and in sections of the working class.

In Denmark you have the Red-Green Alliance, which is also the convergence of the Trotskyists of the Fourth International, and some people coming from the old CP, ecologists, trade unionists and so on. Here it's exactly the same process, with political organisations still existing and individuals - today some 1,000 people and even five deputies in the Danish parliament.

In Greece as you know, it's very recent, there's a convergence of different Trotskyist currents, people coming from left social democracy and so on. In Turkey you have the ODP, composed of people coming from the Communist party, extreme left organisations and many other different currents. In all this you can see concretely the emergence of new anti-capitalist organisations which is very important.

And today the Trotskyists in France, us and Lutte Ouvriere, are rather strong. All the time the mainstream press and TV are forced to speak about the extreme left. During the elections we got nearly one million votes and five European deputies. In the recent municipal elections where unfortunately it was not possible to have a joint list, we got on average four percent of the vote. But in the cities we got between five and 12 percent, especially in the working class neighbourhoods. According to the opinion polls, it would be possible for the extreme left to have more votes than the Communist Party or the Greens.

There are four main tasks for the revolutionaries today. First, we have to "walk on two legs". That means in a perspective of building new mass anti-capitalist parties, we have to address two different constituencies. First, the traditional working class with its traditional organisations and we shouldn't neglect that. Because some young people say to us "what are you doing these things with social democrats and Communists for, they are totally finished"; but we have to say, no it's not finished, even if they are in total crisis, like the Communist Party in France. We have to continue to address them and to try to make united fronts with them - not in elections but in action. That's the first "leg" we have to walk on.

The second - and it's sometimes complicated to do both at the same time - is to address the new mobilisations, all the anti-globalisation activists, the majority of whom are young people totally disgusted with the traditional organisations and who have built a wide range of struggle organisations. Probably these people would be the majority of the new mass anti-capitalist party we want to build.

In the anti-globalisation movement we have to avoid two errors. The first is to be 'tailist', to just uncritically follow the movement. Today we have some people who say "it's fantastic, it's a new revolutionary international" â€” but I don't think so. This movement is not homogeneous; as I said before it's united on the basis of fighting the effects of capitalism. I was in Porto Alegre, and it was a fantastic success, thousands of people united - Brazilian peasants, Paris intellectuals, workers from Belgium - but united in a self-disciplined mood of total contestation of the effects of capitalism. But as far as the political answers to be given, then of course there is not unity. We are confronted with, and shall be in the future more and more, with reformist as well as revolutionary answers. You have in this movement people who think it's possible to have a better, more humane capitalism. You can see it in the debate on the Tobin tax; some people see it as a way of saving capitalism. We think a Tobin tax has to be used against capitalism.

But then I think we have to be in this movement not as "red teachers" who have the truth which everyone has to learn - that would be stupid - but also not to intervene just as uncritical followers. So we have to participate, to build this movement, but with our own ideas which we have to debate with others in a fraternal way.

Regroupment

The third thing is to continue the regroupment of the European anti-capitalist organisations, which we began two years ago in Barcelona, and then after that in Paris, including the SWP. That means to have the beginning of a

Europe-wide co-ordination, not just to have debates which is important, but also to see what kind of joint mass campaigns to defend the working class we can have.

And finally, it's a slightly different thing, to meet and debate with revolutionary organisations. Of course to debate about the past, but also to exchange experiences and see what agreement exists about what to do now and in the future. That's why we're very happy to have these new contacts in the SWP and with our comrades in Scotland, the SSP. I think it's very important, it's new as you know - not only the contacts of the SWP with the ISG in England, but also the contacts of the SWP with the LCR and with our international tendency, the Fourth International.

We know we have divergences, but we have to be responsible. Today we are not isolated as we were in the past. There is a new wave; there are hundreds of thousands of people, maybe millions, who have begun to dream again. To dream is revolutionary. To dream of the smashing of capitalism, to dream of a new society, to dream of a new time of socialism. It's totally new, and we mustn't deceive this new generation. We shouldn't continue our divisions, where they are, in a certain sense, artificial. We have to regroup all the people today who are ready to fight the bourgeoisie, fight reformism and fight for a socialist revolution."

ALEX CALLINICOS

"IN the wake of the Russian revolution there were successive waves of revolutionary struggle which went right across Europe. It had an impact in Latin America, parts of Asia and so on. Successive waves of working class struggle. Each of these waves were characterised by two things. One, as the struggle took off the successes of some groups in struggling prompted other groups to struggle, and associated with this a generalisation, a radicalisation of people's ideas. People who had been non-political, had no political perspective whatever, got involved in the movement saw they could change society and had the power to change society.

This is the characteristic feature of these waves, brilliantly described in Rosa Luxemburg's little book *The Mass Strike*, which described economic struggles leading to political struggles, leading back into economic struggles, they give hope to the most oppressed groups in society.

There are a couple of other things we have to say about these waves. When the waves don't break through, the ruling class use every means in their power to come back and claw back what has been gained at a previous stage. Again Susan George here described some machinations of the ruling class, the way they use the secret police, torture, counter-revolutionary troops, every means conceivable. If you read about the aftermath of the destruction of the Paris Commune, you get some idea, 20,000 people murdered. If you read about the methods used against the Russian revolution, the civil war in Germany 1918-20, if you read about the rise of Nazism, you have some idea about what counter-revolutionary violence means.

If you read about Latin America from the late 1960s to the early 1980s, after the wave of revolt has been broken, you talk about murder, torture, how many were killed? - who knows? - 5,000 or 10,000 in Chile, 20 or 30,000 killed across Latin America, the most barbarous means used to crush the wave.

Also when you talk in these terms, you talk about something else. When the wave doesn't break though it creates discontinuity in the history of the workers movement. Quite simply, if the wave is moving forward, solidarity is at a premium, people understand how individual struggles become collective struggles, personal issues become political issues. When the wave is broken, things can go the other way. When workers are advancing forward, how do you improve your lives? - collectively. Even after a strike is broken, how do you improve your position, you crawl up to the foreman, try to get more overtime than the person next to you. You begin to blame each other rather than see

collective solutions. After each defeat of the workers movement the setback has taken place. After the Paris Commune it was 15 years before the revival of the workers movement in France. After the containment of Chartism in Britain, it was 30 or 35 years before you had a revival of the workers movement.

Defeat

The history we live with is the history of the defeat of the Russian revolution, the strangulation of the Russian revolution, produced by foreign intervention, counter-revolution in Russia itself, the White armies and so on. Out of the strangulation of the Russian revolution, the rise of Stalinism - and associated with the rise of Stalinism, the inability to fight Hitler in Germany, the victory of fascism, first in Italy, Nazism in Germany - probably the biggest defeat in the history of the workers movement.

After each defeat two things happen. People turn back from collective solutions to individual solution, and among whole layers of people the sense of hope disappears. When hope disappears people turn away from revolutionary solution. Sometimes they go back to the old ideas of reforming the system, often they drop out of politics completely.

There is not just a cumulative rise in the level of revolutionary understanding. It rises with the rise of the wave of struggle; if the struggle is defeated, it can collapse. Of course the rise in the wave of struggle doesn't have to be defeated. Here we have to disagree profoundly with people like Susan George. Because a rise in the wave of struggle can create situations in which the ruling class is paralysed. Mass strikes, occupations of factories, workers taking over the streets, can create a situation where armies begin to fall apart, police go on strike - something inconceivable in Britain today - police line up with workers, the whole fragmentation of society. In those situations the forces left to the ruling class to control society are very, very small indeed.

People have read John Reed's *Ten Days that Shook the World*, or Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*. When you have the situation of two or three battalions left defending the Winter Palace in 1917, you have the sense the revolution has overwhelmed every institution of the state. It's a question at that point of the use of force by the revolutionaries, not against the whole state machine, but the residual lump of the state machine which is there to defend capitalist property.

And therefore when we argue with Susan George about violence, it's not a question of individual bombs against the state machine today, it's a question of having a conception of a certain point, in any of the European countries, that the equivalent of the Parachute Regiment or the SAS could be defending the last bastions of bourgeois power, and we have to have the means at that point to deal with them. These means are provided by the rising workers' movement, summarised in the 1930s by Trotsky, He describes how the picket line becomes the armed workers' militia, the armed workers' militia becomes the beginning of a workers' army. How the occupation of the factories leads to the creation of workers delegates, workers delegates get together, the beginning of workers councils, a counter-state to the state of the other class. That's the perspective we have.

Nevertheless, this perspective arises at the high point of struggle - it rises in the Paris Commune, it rises in Russia in 1917, you get a glimmer of it in France and Spain in 1936. Yet get a glimmer of it, but defeat leads to demoralisation, and a moving away from this notion. It leads to the notion that, as Tony Cliff pointed out, people moved away from the idea that mass workers' struggle can change society, towards the notion of substitutionism. Something can substitute for the working class itself. It's tragic, in the 1930s, people who had identified with the Russian revolution thought "who can stop Hitler?; Trotsky is wonderful, but how many forces has Trotsky got?, we have to put our faith in Stalin".

If you read the letters of Bertold Brecht at the time, the great German poet and playwright describes Stalin as 'a new

Communist Czar', completely reactionary, and what is Brecht's conclusion - only Stalin can stop Hitler, so we have to support what Stalin does. That's the tragedy of a whole generation.

The difficulty is that the poison that arises from defeats can then contaminate the next period of uprising. The poison which resulted from the defeats of the rise of Stalinism, the defeat in Germany led to the contamination of the generation involved in the revolt of 1934-6. Led to the contamination of the people involved in the struggles France, Italy and Greece in 1943-5. This meant they threw away the possibility of victory on the mistaken idea they had to do what Stalin said.

Aftermath

We live in the aftermath of the last great period of struggle, from 1967-8 to the mid- or late 1970s. What's interesting about this period is two things; first how broken the continuity with the past was. In 1968 Alain was in an organisation of only about 400 people, I was in an organisation of just 100 people. This was the tradition of 1917 carried forward in some sort of authentic form.

As the struggle rose, those ideas were generalised and began to have an impact. But you also find the filth from the past had an impact. In 1968, right across the world, it's not true that all the people who became revolutionaries identified with the tradition of Lenin and Trotsky, many identified with the tradition of Stalin and Mao. Many looked to other alternatives.

In my opinion Che Guevara sacrificed his life needlessly by trying to fight world capitalism in the most backward part of Bolivia, with no contact with the local peasantry and trying to wage guerrilla struggle. His heroic death inspired many thousands of other people across Latin America, a few people in Europe, and across the Asian subcontinent trying to emulate him, and they often died heroic deaths needlessly.

You had the rise of struggle, but more importantly the lack of a political leadership emerging in that struggle which had some understanding of the total picture, meant that when the opportunities arose they didn't seize those opportunities which existed for a beginning of a breakthrough to socialist revolution, especially in Portugal in 1974-5. When struggles began to be defeated they had no notion of how you retreat in that situation, so you had absolute catastrophes in one part of the world after another.

The general rise of struggle does not lead automatically to clarification of ideas. The rise in the wave of struggle is absolutely important: if you don't identify with the rise in the wave of struggle, you'll never have any effect. But in the rising wave of struggle - intellectual clarity, working out the ideas, learn the traditions going right back to Marx, Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, Trotsky - the people who began to generalise and understand, is all important.

We're talking today about a revival, a new beginning, a new wave of struggle. The key question for everyone here is how to relate to it. The first thing we have to understand is that we've lived through a long period of defeats, from the mid-1970s to the beginning of the new millennium. That period of defeats has had a terrible effect on all sorts of people in the working class movement.

You also find some of the old ideas persist through. The idea that somehow you find some substitute for direct struggle with the system. Hearing Susan George it's very interesting because she's been brilliant in building the struggles of the last two years, but she still has this belief that if somehow you can rig this bit of parliamentary legislation, a bit of pressure from this NGO on the system, somehow you will change it. These ideas persist.

What is necessary today is two things, quite simple. Everywhere people have to get involved in the rising movement. In Britain that means the anti-capitalist movement, going to Genoa, but not just going to Genoa, reporting back from Genoa in each locality. There are very large numbers of young people who we haven't been able to touch yet who want to be involved in that movement. Secondly, the Socialist Alliance, drawing together all those people in the labour movement who want to resist the tide of Blairism, resist the tide of privatisation. And the third thing is a new mood that's just beginning to develop in certain industries, where rank and file workers are beginning to say "we can fight back, our union leaders won't, we have to build rank and file groups."

Tide

But with this new movement, some people come to it with old ideas, and we have to say the tide coming in is in the same place as the tide going out. With tide coming in, there's a future, with the tide going out there's no future. With the people coming into the movement, we have to reach out to them, embrace them, involve them in activities.

At the same time, because we've been through a period of defeats, they bring a lot of the old ideas with them. You'll get people at Socialist Alliance meetings who still believe in the parliamentary road to socialism.

We have to fight within the broader movement to build a revolutionary current. And with those people left over from the 1960s who continue to adhere to those (revolutionary) ideas, we have to work together to create a revolutionary current. In the process we have to work to chuck out the bits of substitutionism, the ideas there's some substitute for the working class. Parliamentary elections can be a platform for from which socialists can win an audience. They aren't a substitute for big struggles.

We have to be involved in the wider movement, but simultaneously understand someone has to bring the different strands together, and that is the building of a revolutionary movement.

It's wonderful when you hear about the struggle against water privatisation in Bolivia. Or about the struggle where twice the indigenous population of Ecuador has forced the government to throw out an IMF package. You also have to understand the IMF will be back. The Ecuadorian ruling class will be back. The Bolivian ruling class will be back, backed by the American ruling class.

Unless at some point there's a revolutionary breakthrough, their side will regain the initiative. We have to build the wider movement, but within that build a revolutionary current that's clear on the central issue: you can't reform the system, you have to overthrow it.