

The Guardian and Leninism

What is the function of a radical paper?

By RANDY FURST
and HARRY RING

This concludes a four-part series that began in our issue of May 1. The articles have sought to trace the political evolution of the *Guardian* and to draw lessons from the political crises that have afflicted the paper, culminating in an April 9 walkout by a group of staff workers and the establishment of a rival *Liberated Guardian*.

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In examining the political roots of the difficulties which have beset the *Guardian*, it becomes apparent that a key factor has been the paper's lack of a thought-out political perspective for the coming revolutionary struggles in this country.

As a result, the *Guardian* has in recent years opportunistically adapted to ultraleft currents in an effort to become a spokesman for them.

This adaptation derived from the *Guardian's* hope that in the days to come a new radical political party would emerge in which it would play a central role. But its conception of what such a party would be in terms of basic political program, or how it would come into being, has been nebulous.

The general approach has been the one most commonly associated with the "new left," i.e., that the established political parties and tendencies were "irrelevant," and that the present heterogeneous body of unaffiliated radicals generally known as "the movement" would someday metamorphize into a new radical party.

In seeking to advance such a perspective, the *Guardian* editors have failed to grasp that a viable movement must of necessity be built around agreement with a meaningful and relevant program. In fact the key to building a revolutionary party is the very process of elaborating a political program on the basis of which it recruits its members. Anything less flies apart at the first crisis that besets it.

This lesson of political life was amply illustrated by the fate of SDS.

The first upsurge of SDS seemed to provide definitive proof that it was possible to escape the onerous task of developing a political ideology and assembling a membership on the basis of a commonly agreed on program. Yet when SDS was compelled by events and by internal factionalism to come to grips with basic political and ideological issues, the organization which seemed so powerful was literally shattered in a matter of months. Without the cement of programmatic agreement, SDS simply flew apart.

The *Guardian* never made a serious effort to analyze what had gone wrong with SDS or why. Instead, continuing with the cue it took from the anti-PL faction in SDS, which at one point

declared itself "Marxist-Leninist," the *Guardian* proclaimed that it too was Marxist-Leninist and continues to occasionally so proclaim.

But the *Guardian* has not indicated the slightest comprehension of Lenin's particular contribution to Marxist theory, a contribution that was key to the victory of the Russian Revolution.

The revolutionary party

What distinguished Lenin, and Leninism, was precisely the theory of how to build a revolutionary party. Lenin rejected and fought the concept of his *Guardian*-type contemporaries that the way to build a revolutionary movement is to first assemble the members and then elaborate a program. He contended—and history vindicated him—that an effective revolutionary cadre could be assembled *only* on the basis of a program, and that the elaboration of a program was fundamental to the process of assembling the cadre.

Similarly Lenin rejected and fought the notion that a radical paper with an amorphous "all-inclusive" political line could serve as the vehicle for assembling the cadres for a revolutionary Marxist party. Instead, and again history has frequently confirmed this, such a paper can only build a movement in its own image. (The anarchist-oriented ultralefts who were attracted to the *Guardian* are a case in point.)

Even where it may be a question of attempting to draw together different ideological currents which appear to be evolving toward a common basic outlook, this cannot be done by blurring political differences. Again, as Lenin explained, in order to unite it is necessary to first draw the lines of difference. To do otherwise serves only to further compound the ideological confusion which has proven such an obstacle to the development of the movement.

Programmatic clarity is essential in the actual process of building a Marxist-Leninist party. Lenin's concept of democratic centralism, for example, was not simply a practical organizational form whereby a party arrived at decisions democratically and then carried them out in a united way, with any minorities abiding by and loyally carrying out majority decisions.

Democratic centralism is indeed that. But it is also something far more. What Lenin taught was that such a party could be successfully built only if it was a *politically homogeneous* organization.

In any revolutionary organization composed of serious, thinking people disagreements on one or another issue, lesser or greater, will inevitably arise. What binds such a formation together then and makes unity in action possible is thought-out political agreement on a long-range program more basic than the particular issues which may divide them at the moment.

The most basic programmatic issue for a revolutionary party, or for those who seek to build one, is the conviction that the mobilization of the working class and its allies for a successful struggle against capitalism is a realizable goal in the present epoch and



V. I. Lenin

that the historical function of a revolutionary party is to organize and lead that struggle.

To build a mass movement

What is required for such a party, Lenin taught, is not some religious faith in the future victory, but the capacity to elaborate a political strategy capable of developing the mass movement that is indispensable to such a victory.

Winning such a base demands being able to relate to the working people and their allies at their *given level of political consciousness*, and through a combined process of struggle and education raise that consciousness to a socialist level.

This means developing a systematic program of transitional demands that are clearly relevant to current issues but are capable of moving sectors of the population into action on an objectively anticapitalist basis. This in turn facilitates advances in consciousness and increased receptivity to basic socialist ideas.

The movement for the immediate withdrawal of U.S. forces from Indochina, and the profoundly radicalizing effect that movement has had, is one example of such a process.

The development of such transitional demands requires far more than simply being opposed to such evils as war, racism, exploitation and oppression and registering such opposition in militant rhetoric. Ultralefts and reformists alike are also capable of such "opposition."

In the U.S. today, a revolutionary program, concretely, is one that above all leads the working people and their allies to break with the two capitalist parties.

Independent action

It means, for example, projecting and helping to advance the development of Black and Chicano parties in opposition to the capitalist parties and helping to formulate programs that will lead in a revolutionary direction.

It means full, vigorous support to all movements whose aims and aspirations are in and of themselves of an anticapitalist character. The women's liberation movement is an excellent example of this.

A Leninist program today means promoting a struggle within the organized labor movement against all wings of the trade union bureaucracy—"progressive" as well as reactionary. That means counterposing class-strug-

gle policies to their class-collaborationist relations with employers and government. It means promoting the idea of the need for unions to break with the Republican and Democratic parties and building a labor party.

A Leninist program, then, means the elaboration of general and specific political stands which clearly reject the approach of the ultraleft sectarians and draw a decisive ideological and programmatic line between the revolutionaries and the reformists.

Simply to pose some of the weighty political issues that serious revolutionaries must grapple with should be sufficient for any careful reader of the *Guardian* to realize how barren it is from a Marxist point of view.

The *Guardian* has failed to come to grips with virtually every one of the issues we have pointed to here, and more besides. To cite a further example: Leninists regard it as impermissible, as a matter of principle, to support any capitalist candidate. At the same time, Lenin was in the forefront of opposing those ultralefts who would simply abstain from the bourgeois electoral process (see *Leftwing Communism, An Infantile Disorder*).

But the "Leninist" *Guardian* has, under the Smith-Beinin stewardship, never attempted a generalized political statement on this issue. In practice, it has either advocated abstention in elections, even when there were socialist candidates it could have supported on a principled basis, or it has simply ducked the question.

Similarly, while offering militant rhetorical support to the movement for Black and Brown power, the *Guardian* has yet to offer any analytical treatment of the need for, and ways and means of building, the independent Black and Brown parties indispensable to the fight for such power.

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If it disagrees with such a perspective, it should offer alternatives to it.

We have already discussed in previous articles, the *Guardian's* sorry record in relation to the building of the antiwar movement. In regard to problems of the labor movement, it is not possible to argue with the *Guardian's* editorial positions since it simply has never offered any.

We cite these things not merely to demonstrate deficiencies in the *Guardian's* politics. The *Guardian's* proclaimed reason for existence is that in one way or another it will prove a prime force in the development of a new political movement. We think history provides the important lesson that significant new movements are not built by those who are incorrect or simply fail to deal with central political issues.

The *Guardian's* failure to come to grips with such questions is paralleled by its studious efforts to avoid relating in a serious, analytical way to the existing political tendencies. It should be fairly apparent that if a paper is to be effective in persuading people of the need to build a new movement, it should be capable of at least explaining to them what is wrong with the existing ones.

During the heyday of "new leftism" it was possible to duck this problem with unexplained demagogic references to the "irrelevancy" of the "old left." But today the key political issues that divided the reformists from the revolutionary Marxists—specifically the reformist social democrats and Stalinists from the Trotskyists—have all come to the fore within the entire movement. When the ranks of the "new left" began to comprehend that there is in fact a need for ideology and that the issue of the role of the working class in social change cannot be avoided, then all the issues conveniently swept

aside as old-left hairsplitting became central again.

Lenin explained that a revolutionary paper is the principal organizer of the revolutionary party, and he did not mean that simply in the narrow organizational sense. He saw such a paper as the main instrument for providing ideological clarity and day-to-day political leadership for the party and for those it sought to influence.

Nor did he see that role simply for the paper of an already established party. If the *Guardian* editors were to explain to Lenin that they haven't thought out a program for a party because they don't yet represent one, he would have surely replied that they never would become the spokesman for such a party unless and until they did develop such a program, at least in essentials.

And if they had explained they simply hadn't been able to work out adequate answers to all these thorny questions, he would have replied: Good, then apply yourself to doing so. Make your paper a forum for a free exchange of socialist views and in the course of such a discussion, elaborate your own point of view. But you will never speak for others until you think out what you have to say.

But, the *Guardian* editors may have protested, at least we are not creatures of any dogma. By being independent we are able to think freely and critically. Such independence, we think Lenin would have replied, is simply the "independence" to be buffeted by one or another political pressure of the moment. It is the "independence" to stumble from one political crisis to another.

We submit that this is the essential fact of the *Guardian's* ongoing political crises. We would also venture to predict that while the present *Guardian* crisis may be the most acute so far, it is not the last.