

# PARLIAMENTARISM

## and Communist strategy

## Proletarian Pamphlet No: 3



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## INTRODUCTION

This Pamphlet consists essentially of ~~three parts, The Sixty~~, which appeared originally as Pamphlet No.1 (Communism, The Labour Party and the Left), contained analysis of the three main 'revolutionary' organisations in the runup to the 1974 UK elections - the CPGB, IS and IMG. The value of retaining this piece is that it was a critique of these organisations in action when confronted with real and immediate political posers, and so of much more analytical value than polemical criticism of their literary productions. This was fully brought home to us by the reactions of members of those organisations; the main readership of the Pamphlet in fact. Almost unanimously they agreed (much to our surprise) with the criticisms of the organisations - of which they (as individuals) were not members! Which speaks volumes as to the chasm between theory and practice endemic to the British Left.

The major criticism of the Pamphlet was that it did not deal with all the 'revolutionary' organisations' reaction to the Election. This was quite deliberate and we have had no cause to change our mind and go for 'full coverage'. The CPGB, IS and IMG were tackled because they were the biggest and most significant 'vanguards'; and as quite disparate entities could be seen to cover the whole spectrum of Left response to electoral events, within a self-professed Leninist frame of reference. All the other organisations nominally Leninist have lines consisting of merely combinations and permutations of those whose archetypal expression is given by the three cited.

Our own criticism of the original Pamphlet relates to the opening section 'Communism and Elections', where we adopted a thoroughly orthodox Leninist/Comintern position, saying that communist participation in Parliament is a matter of tactics and not principle or strategy. In our historical analysis for Pamphlet No.2 we established that this line is wrong for communists in developed bourgeois democracies. Parliamentarism (nomatter what 'revolutionary' or 'Bolshevik' label is stuck on) is not a matter of tactics - as we thought -but is on the contrary a key matter of strategy.

Communist strategy under bourgeois democracy is for the attainment of proletarian revolution - not more bourgeois democracy in an 'improved' state. The means for the attainment of this fundamental goal is realised in tactics - but the sum of tactics per se never of themselves amount to a strategy. First the strategy is derived from the theory of scientific socialism, then and only then expedient tactics are derived therefrom. Strategy is always primary and tactics subserve strategy as a derived category. Thus wherever a tactical measure rather than expedite strategic implementation threatens to compromise it, the tactic gets dropped and not the strategy changed.

Strategy is what constitutes the Communist Programme - how proletarian revolution is to be effected in the given society at the time of writing - and tactics are deduced therefrom. So programmatic measures like Workers Councils, encroaching upon and finally wresting economic, social and state power, are nowise tactical but are strategic proposals, hence on the envisaged conciliar framework no expedient chopping and changing is permissible. Conversely, the means of promoting those organs of mass mobilisation, and surmounting the inevitable and multiform initial difficulties, are truly the stuff of good tactics.

Likewise the very task within a developed bourgeois democracy of forming a genuinely Marxist communist party, and not a more or less radical social-democratic one, is the essence of a strategic problem. Thus all the attempts by Marxist-Leninists in Britain have come to nothing since they conceived of the problem in tactical terms: what groups and persons could be brought together under what slogans, with what composition of Central Committee and with what minimum 'programmatic' documentation/agreement. As we showed in Pamphlet No.2 (The Crisis of British Capital) this 'tactical' approach undermined the CPGB from its formation in 1920, and likewise has done so to the contemporary self-proclaimed successor to the CPGB, the Communist Party of Britain (M-L). The first time tragedy, the second farce, as Marx put it.

In a developed Bourgeois democracy capital rules by consent induced by the false consciousness created through its control of the means of ideological, as well as material, production - or rather as its complement. Force, the coercive apparatus of the state, is the emergency recourse of last resort when the normative, 'peaceful and political' means

of control have failed. Lenin spelled this out in 1917:

"A democratic republic is the best possible shell for capitalism, and, therefore, once capital has gained control of this very best shell, it establishes its power so securely, so firmly, that no change, either of persons, of institutions, or of parties in the bourgeois-democratic republic, can shake it". (State and Revolution, original emphasis).

Lenin might also have added that industrial capital at least, knows this very well, and the legendary paralysing stability of the British political regimen, despite all the vicissitudes of the economy this century, constantly reinforces the point. Neither is the British bourgeoisie slow to point the value of 'proper democracy' to others less experienced: their pressure on Rhodesia for 'one man one vote' is precisely and overtly but the latest example of this ultimate weapon for preventing revolution. Nearer home, the pressure of European Social-Democracy for 'Parliamentary democracy' in Portugal (in contradistinction to workers' power latent in workers' and soldiers' councils) shows what it is all about. It likewise shows that the Portuguese Communist Party does not know, or rather does not want to know the name of the game (direct workers' power) since it confines its frame of reference to operations (and Christian-Democrat type manipulations) within 'democracy'. The PCP is thus destined to lose either to the Right or the Left, (with the former more likely) as too is the ever more degenerate Spanish CP, which has lost all revolutionary pretence in the accelerating democratic debauch. The trouble is they queer the pitch for real communists.

But the British bourgeoisie has a very keen awareness of what forms of representation legitimate capitalism (nomatter what the subjective intentions of those participating) and what forms (counciliar) are fundamentally antithetical to it. And who can say they are not so right when the whole British Left, excepting only COBI (plus the Marxist-Leninist and anarchist groupuscules) fondly imagine they can 'use' Parliament against the bourgeoisie! Elsewhere, (but they are after all foreign), the collapse of the Greek military regime into democracy, and the accelerating trend underway in Iberia, reiterates just who is using parliamentarism for what, for the n'th time. And has not the Congress Party been defending Indian parliamentary democracy these three decades past, with no less than three mass 'Communist' Parties for opposition in elections !?

There are two historic stages in the process of the proletariat's self-emancipation. The first is the winning of economic sufficiency and bourgeois democracy to provide the working class with maximum scope for the next stage - of leaving the defensive (trades union and 'labour representation' struggles) and taking over the initiative. (cf. Marx/Engels on the Factory Acts and on Chartism). At the offensive stage, ie now, the proletariat has the following strategic aims:

- i. its consolidation as a political class, led by a theoretically adroit Communist party.
- ii. attacking bourgeois hegemony in all facets of social life, especially the division of labour.
- iii. the formation of its own potential organs of social, economic and state power through the building of a coordinated structure of workers' councils in factory and housing, while industrial unions conduct the specifically economic struggle on a class-wide (not craft or trade) basis.

All this presupposes an initial but deepening rupture with the worldview of bourgeois democracy, and its operative focus in Parliament. A communist movement must from the outset therefore be predicated on decisive rejection of any form of parliamentary activity under democracy, especially the self-contradictory fiction of using elections 'as a platform' but not 'to get elected'.

The law of uneven development is absolute, as Lenin said slamming Trotsky in 1915. Thus we recognise, since there is no such thing as inevitable, linear social development as the Fabians (say of the B&ICO) would have us believe, that the first stage of proletarian emancipation can be regressed upon (or even omitted !) in conditions of social and economic breakdown. Such conditions, if occurring in the Britain of the immediate future, would be those of rampant fascism, and would mean the loss of that room for manoeuvre that the class had built up for itself within bourgeois democracy. Under such exceptional circumstances, and such only, would COBI even consider parliamentary activity, and even that would most likely be only as a component of a Popular Front, such as stemmed the advance of fascism in the France of the mid-1930's. Were we strong enough not to need participation

in a popular bloc then we should almost certainly go onto the offensive, reading from history that the best form of defence is attack.

Likewise we do and have advocated voting in exceptional consultative actions (like the EEC, or a conceivable referendum on the Monarchy) on the specific grounds that it is not the normal stabilising representation process here in operation, but is on the contrary, an issue likely to shift the balance of social power significantly one way or the other.

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The bulk of this edition consists of the classic Comintern debate at the Second Congress in 1920, between Bordiga and Bukharin, with Lenin intervening to impose the peculiar tactics of the Russian situation upon the world movement as prescribed strategy. Bukharin's devious evasions of Bordiga's scientific arguments will be apparent. And lest anyone still be in doubt as to the acuity and prescience of the respective positions and protagonists, they have only to read the theoretical works of both - prior and subsequent to 1920 - to be fully convinced. In Bukharin's reply, we here can see theory conflated with practice, strategy dissolved into tactics. Bordiga tries to lay down a strategic perspective for Communists within bourgeois democracies: "For that reason the Communist Parties will never obtain great success in propaganda on behalf of the revolutionary Marxist method if the severing of all contacts with the machinery of bourgeois democracy is not put at the basis of their work for the dictatorship of the proletariat and the workers' councils". (para 9 of Theses). This is met with Bukharin's purely pragmatic: "(Workers councils/soviets) do not yet exist. They are not yet a reality whereas the bourgeois parliament is a reality. We say in our theses that we must be in these institutions, we must have here our revolutionary spies." They are speaking entirely different languages. Bukharin's own glorious example of this 'revolutionary parliamentarism' exactly confirm Bordiga's point. In fact only two non-Russian instances are cited - Liebknecht and Høglund. They stand out as glorious exceptions because they were members of social-democratic parties that were so enmeshed in parliamentarism they became fit and proper parts of the reforming establishment. So on the outbreak of WW1 they alone stood out from their parties in being 'unpatriotic'. However even there, Liebknecht's speeches in the Reichstag were much less effectual than his public meetings and pamphlets, which were in fact translated into many languages, including English (and published by the SLP). Further, the only party ever to carry out rigorous revolutionary parliamentarism was ironically the Bordigist CP, in deference to this Congress' decisions, and its subsequent success in stemming the tide of fascism in Italy is a matter of history. But actual historical experience seems to cut little ice with many self-professed historical materialists, as the same 'dialectical procedures' were followed so gloriously in Chile, and still constitutes the programmes of the CP, MAPU and MIR !

On the other hand the use the Bolsheviks were able to make of the Duma was of undoubted value to them. But this was precisely because Russia was not a developed bourgeois democracy, in stark contrast to western Europe. In Russia the capitalist mode of production was scarcely even dominant, as Lenin himself recognised as late as 1912:

"A huge country, with a population of 150,000,000 spread over a vast area, scattered, oppressed, deprived of all rights, ignorant, fenced off from 'evil influences' by a swarm of authorities, police, spies - the whole of this country is beginning to get into a ferment... But Russia today is still in the period of her bourgeois and not her proletarian transformation; it is not the question of the economic emancipation of her proletariat that has become supremely mature, but the question of political emancipation, ie (at bottom) the question of complete bourgeois liberty." (The Revolutionary Rise, and Two Utopias). Scarcely comparable to the Britain Marx could already describe in 1867 (Preface to Vol.1 of Capital) as rotten ripe for proletarian revolution.

No, the value of the Duma and later the Constituent Assembly was as Lenin said for drawing backward masses into modern political life for the first time:

"Political changes in a truly democratic direction, and political revolutions all the more, can never, not under any circumstances, obscure or weaken the slogan of a socialist revolution. On the contrary, they always bring it nearer, widen the basis for it, draw new sections of the petty bourgeoisie and the semiproletarian masses into the socialist struggle". Here (in the United States of Europe Slogan) we see a statement absolutely true for Russia, containing immanent dangers of its being taken as an a-historical absolute, to be applied to all times and places. But the Bolsheviks had another advantage in their 'revolutionary parliamentarism', contingent on the very absolutism under which they worked.

Being an illegal party meant being a disciplined, combative one, for very survival. A party thus steeled in a non-democratic environment could accordingly use such legal, democratic openings as existed, without falling prey to democratic prejudices inherent in the parliamentary form. The reverse of course holds in western Europe where 'civil society' has centuries of strength behind it, where state power in the hands of the ruling class does not stand naked, with some form of 'representative government' holding sway, requiring and inviting 'improvement'. Thus (Second International) social-democracy had become part of the very functioning of parliamentary representation; eg post-1912 the German party (SPD) was the largest in the Reichstag, but was still powerless owing to the Imperial Constitution - which they respected. When this model party of the 2nd International became the government in new republican Weimar society post-1918, the SPD's main task was the physical suppression of proletarian revolution, in league with the proto-fascist Freikorps.

Thus the seminal and continuing struggle for communists in bourgeois democracy is to make and consolidate a fundamental rupture with the bourgeois worldview predicated upon what is held to be 'right, proper and civilised', in a society where 'consent' for such is obtained through the central legitimating agency that is parliament. The rule for real communists must therefore be abstention from parliamentary activity in any form, while the very particularity of exceptions, (supra), merely confirms this rule.

We shall now look at the social-democratic practices of the CPGB, IS and IMG in concrete;

\*\*\*\*\* SECTION 1 \*\*\*\*\*

The Communist Party of Great Britain

The CPGB's 1974 election manifesto argued that 3 aims needed to be achieved: "A Tory defeat, the winning of a Labour Government, and the return of communist MP's." The way to do this they argued, was to vote for their policies which "would cope with today's problems and at the same time open the way to socialism which alone can provide a lasting solution to the crisis". In the event the CP achieved only those aims which it shared with the Labour Party; even the much-vaunted Jimmy Reid did disappointingly badly. (His repeated election frustrations underlie his resignation from the CP recently). In the general elections of the 1950's and 1960's, it could generally be said that if Labour did well, so did the CP. Why the difference now? The answer is to be found partly in the particular reformist parliamentary policies that the CP adopted in February '74. An examination of what the CP was offering the working class suggests it had totally failed to distinguish what it claimed were communist policies from those of the (explicitly social-democratic) Labour Party. It had also failed to take into account the leftward 'socialist' moves made by the LP during its period in opposition. The CP's 1974 policy is strikingly similar to what it offered in 1970 and thus, even in parliamentary terms, inappropriate.

Because the CP presents no effective communist strategy for moving forward, it presents the Tories as "wreckers, the enemies of democracy, parading their red bogey as a screen to hide their vicious attacks on democratic rights." By contrast, the CP can thus present itself (having distorted the Tory position) as the champions of standing still: "Communist MP's and a big communist vote are needed", we are told, to "extend and defend our democratic rights". This is a further deliberate confusion. The Industrial Relations Act and Phase 3 did not represent fundamental breaches of orthodox bourgeois policy, and hence creeping authoritarianism. The adoption of similar measures by the other bourgeois democratic party in 1964-70 shows this - (a party which the CP was now asking the workers to support). These measures represent tactics used in the struggle between wages and profits, rather than a fundamental shift in the form of bourgeois class rule. And because they represent this, the trade union ideology of the majority of the working class has shown itself to be quite capable of defending itself against the IR Act and previously 'In Place of Strife.' The LP recognised in the 1970-74 period that such industrial legislation is counterproductive, since it antagonises the very supporters on whom a successful prices and incomes policy depends. So instead, it has gone for (a highly successful) Social Contract with the unions.

A communist analysis would have spelt all this out, and more, at the time of the election. But the CP was more interested in fighting previous battles (and tilting at windmills), battles which the industrial strength of the dockers and miners and other trade unionists had shown could be won without any help from Communist or left-Labour MP's.