

What The National Liberation Discussion Is About

A Discussion Document

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Discussion Document for I.S. Convention

WHAT THE DEBATE ON NATIONAL LIBERATION IS ABOUT

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The purpose of this discussion document is to focus on the political conclusions which should be drawn from the national liberation debate. These conclusions are stated in general form in section III of the E.C. national liberation document, but need to be developed and concretized with examples. In a nutshell, this discussion is part of a process of re-orienting and re-educating our organization, to prepare ourselves to take advantages of opportunities which we are in danger of passing by.

Because of the length of the national liberation document, and particularly the need for a relatively lengthy section on our general method of approach, a considerable amount of material on specific movements today had to be left out. This included sections on Eritrea, on Palestine, a brief discussion of Nicaragua, etc. Some of this will probably be written up separately for the organization following the Convention. But it should be clear that the document aims to overcome part of our legacy of the past, when with a few exceptions we have paid little attention to most national liberation movements and even less to concretely analyzing or building relations with them.

In the past few weeks, there have been demonstrations in cities throughout this country in support of the struggle in Nicaragua against the U.S.-backed Somoza dictatorship. As far as I know, the only place where we were involved in these demonstrations was Austin, Texas, where an IS member gave a well-received solidarity speech on behalf of the local Southern Africa Liberation Action Committee. Everywhere else, to my knowledge, we were not involved at all. We need to sharpen our theory and our perspectives so that our branches begin not only participating in such actions, but initiating them.

Probably the three most important revolutionary crises in the world today, outside southern Africa, are: Nicaragua, Peru and Iran. In every one of these situations, national liberation is an extremely important element. In fact, every progressive force in all these struggles recognize their enemy as being American imperialism as well as their own local rulers. The same is true of other left-wing liberation movements like, for example, the Eritrean Popular Liberation Front. Thus, to an important extent our attitude toward national liberation today involves our attitude toward the new international revolutionary left.

Many of the most important struggles of the past several years have erupted in the places where we least expected them. Before 1974, the country in Europe to which we probably paid the least attention was -- Portugal. It was certainly one of the last places we would have expected the emergence of a revolutionary workers' party with views of workers' democracy and strategic conceptions so close to our own -- the PRP. Six months ago, what most of us knew about Nicaragua was primarily that it was considered a possible site for an alternative to the Panama Canal. Today, not only is civil war raging in Nicaragua, but there are working class socialist revolutionaries with whom we hope to establish relations.

We can expect more revolutionary explosions in places where we have not anticipated. We can be certain that an extremely important element in these struggles will be one of national liberation, that is, that the power of American imperialism and multinational corporations stand behind the local ruling class against its own people. Clearly this is the case in the three examples just mentioned. And we all understand the relationship of American imperialism with South Africa.

We can also expect that within some of these struggles, there will be the emergence of revolutionary socialist currents, standing for socialist revolution based on the power of the working class as opposed to bourgeois, "progressive" military or popular front (CP-SP) solutions. That is, revolutionary groups active in the working class, who are non-sectarian in their relations with the rank and file of all other working class forces, but who are not tied up to the bureaucratism and/or reformism of the main workers' parties. Such a tendency arose inside the Portuguese revolutionary process, and will continue to arise in other situations although often on a smaller scale, with many confusing elements and contradictions.

There are a variety of reasons for this. First, the working class in the underdeveloped and semideveloped world has grown qualitatively in the last two decades. On the ideological level, there is the failure of Castroism as a strategy for liberating Latin America, and the full-scale rightward gallop of Maoism. Even more important, undoubtedly, is the economic squeeze of the world economy and the banks on the underdeveloped and semideveloped world, where masses of people and important sections of the working class are periodically threatened with starvation. There is no better example of this today than Peru, where the economic and political impasse of a decaying military dictatorship has produced one of the greatest mass popular movements (but a fragmented and disorganized revolutionary left) in Latin American history, and where a decisive confrontation may be only months away.

The case of Peru is, in fact, important for several reasons. Following the catastrophic defeats of the working class in both Chile and Argentina, most of us had felt that the potential for successful revolutionary struggle in Latin America had been set back for probably a long time to come. What the current struggle in Peru therefore represents, even though it is being waged under extremely difficult conditions and the imminent danger of a new coup, is both the revival of struggle in Latin America and the emergence of the working class as a more conscious force than has been seen in almost any time in Latin America. Here again, our own consciousness, shaped by the defeats of the early 1970s, has fallen behind events.

We need to be very clear that the revolutionary left currents with the greatest potential, are with a few exceptions not arising out of the Trotskyist movement. And where they are (possibly Peru), it is certainly not because of the quality of "leadership" or guidance provided by the Fourth International. They are arising within broader liberation fronts (e.g. the Proletarian Tendency inside the Sandinists).

within underground working class movements, etc. Their political conceptions are not stamped with the formulas which isolated groups of European and American Trotskyists have learned from 1930's and 40's texts. And this is 99.99% to the good!

We do not want to exaggerate the strength of this trend. For example, we have not seen the development of revolutionary socialist, working class groups in the southern Africa liberation struggles. In Angola, the popular power movement as a self-defense movement in the working class urban slums was short-lived. Our hopes for it to spread and develop further were disappointed, by the defeat of the Portuguese revolution, by the injection of Cubans into the political and administrative apparatus, and no doubt because our own expectations of the possibility of working class organization and left-wing opposition to the Neto leadership inside the MPLA were inflated at that time.

But one point must still be insisted on. Without the MPLA victory, there would have been no possibility for popular power at all. Even if it is the MPLA in power which has squashed popular power, it was the struggle waged by the MPLA, and the politically radical and anti-neocolonialist nature of that struggle, which made popular power a potentiality in Angola.

In Zimbabwe, as the E.C. document makes clear, there are no factions of the liberation movement with a strategy based on the working class (notwithstanding Nkomo's historic base among railway workers, and the activity of the Patriotic Front in the recent miners' strike) or a policy of socialist revolution. While unions do exist in Zimbabwe they are extremely weak, and also have been largely ruined by years of factional political battles. The grounds of our political support for ZANU are not based on any socialist rhetoric it may use. Our support for ZANU is because of the way it has waged the armed struggle, its proven record of opposition to neocolonialism and its high degree of independence of forces trying to impose a fraudulent "peaceful" settlement.

Yet the potential for the working class to become a force in the Zimbabwean liberation movement is not foreclosed. Yes, it's true that the white regime and its "internal settlement" have largely been smashed in the countryside, by rural guerilla war, not by the workers. But the question of who will rule Zimbabwe may yet be decided in the cities. When the Smith government falls, or hands what is left of its power over to the British, or to Nkomo, or whatever -- all of which are possible -- an open political struggle may open up in the cities, comparable to the struggle that occurred among the Angolan movements in Luanda. The potential for Zimbabwean workers -- transportation, agriculture, mining and manufacturing -- to take over factories and rail lines, to strike for economic gains, etc. may open up. Certainly, whether such struggles occur will determine to a considerable extent how much freedom workers have in the liberated Zimbabwe. But again, we insist that this potentiality depends on the victory of ZANU. Even if ZANU, or a dominant faction of ZANU in power, proves to be an opponent of the self-organization of the Zimbabwean working class for class goals, it is only the victory of ZANU over imperialism and neo-colonialism that makes that struggle possible. And it is certainly from within ZANU and the left-wing

currents inside ZAPU that the organizers and champions of a Zimbabwean workers' movement, if indeed one emerges, will come.

This is part of the reason for our position of critical political support to movements like MPLA and ZANU. (We are referring here to MPLA during the Angolan liberation war, not to the current Angolan regime). As the E.C. document states, the victory of these radical liberation movements, led by part of the petit-bourgeoisie, lead to the opening up of the most radical possibilities. In addition, the people who actually represent the potential for a workers' movement are dedicated, active members of those liberation movements, and politically committed to them. When we call for political support to a movement, it means we are for revolutionaries in that country being part of that movement. That is, we are for every Zimbabwean revolutionary being in and being a loyal fighter for ZANU. This is part of the difference between "political support" and "military but not political support," as we give to movements which are leading genuine liberation struggles but whose politics are reactionary.

But the best possibility for a revolutionary socialist current to emerge in southern Africa is undoubtedly within the South African Black Consciousness Movement. It is evident that among Black radicals there is widespread dissatisfaction with the traditional ANC, as well as the fact that the movement as a whole has come up against the outer limits of what can be achieved by unarmed young people rioting against the full power of tanks and the apartheid state machinery. The South African struggle is going to be a bitter and protracted one, in which the importance of roots among workers and participation in their economic struggles, as well as underground revolutionary organization, will become increasingly clear. Here again, it is a question of the potential for revolutionary workers' currents to develop, not of anything we can actually see at the moment. But we will want to emphasize our solidarity and extend political support to those groups which we feel might give rise to them.

UPDATING OUR THEORY AND CHANGING OUR PRACTICE

In the past, except for our many years of analysis and debate on Vietnam, before the Portuguese revolution and the Angolan war, we almost never attempted to make concrete analyses of forces involved in liberation struggles. Where we did make an attempt to do so, our position was based on two assumptions: (1) we are for the victory of the liberation struggle against imperialism, and (2) we are for criticizing the liberation movements for not having a clear socialism-from-below strategy. Needless to say, this generally meant lumping together all national liberation movements under a common heading, whether they were bourgeois, stalinist or led by petit-bourgeois radicals. This was part of the reason why, for example, we knew virtually nothing about the struggles inside the left in Chile.

Undoubtedly, we believed that the best contribution we could make to the international revolutionary process, and to the American left, was to be the critics of liberation movements from a revolutionary working class standpoint, and to fight the third worldism and pro-stalinism of the American left. We do not propose to rehash

what was right or wrong about our functioning here or there. The point is that, without changing any of our basic principles, we want a very different approach to supporting such movements in the future. Rather than approaching liberation movements as critics, we want to be first and foremost their supporters. In our attitude toward the Proletarian Tendency of the Sandibists, or ZANU, EPLF, etc, we will take the attitude of solidarity and support until and unless we see clear reasons not to -- rather than, as in the past, assuming such groups could not be supported politically until we were fully familiar with their ideology and full program.

This is a lesson we have learned in different ways. Partly, it is a change in our instincts based on our own experiences building movements inside our own working class. We have learned the necessity of concreteness rather than abstractions in politics, of making certain kinds of alliances for clearly understood purposes, etc. Partly, it is a change in our attitude toward the American left and ourselves. Given the multiple crises and re-orientations in the left today, we no longer view ourselves as a tiny ideological oasis in a sea of petit-bourgeois stalinist elitism, or as a pole of attraction among the wreckage of Trotskyist sects. And not least, it is something we learned from the Portuguese revolution -- both the positive lessons of the initiatives for revolutionary unity and working class organization made by the PRP, and the negative lessons provided by the sad example of the British IS which approached that revolutionary struggle with the very best intentions as outside literary critics.

This is not to say that we equate ZANU, EPLF, the left-wing Sandinists or the left wing of the Palestinian liberation struggle with the PRP. We don't. For that matter, we don't equate them with each other. Concrete analysis is the key in each case. Our general attitude is that where anti-colonialist or other liberation movements are led by fronts of a radical character, with petit-bourgeois leadership but with room for the development of various currents, the possibility of a revolutionary pole is much greater than in those movements led by a national bourgeoisie seeking to simply take over the old colonial machinery, or by a Stalinist party with its own machine prepared to establish a new bureaucratic state.

Our goal is to become as deeply involved with these radical liberation movements as we possibly can. We believe it is possible to form alliances on various levels, for different purposes, depending on the specific nature of each struggle and the degree of political agreement and understanding between particular movements and ourselves. Ties between liberation movements and ourselves can help not only to provide support to progressive liberation struggles. They can also help us in our job of preparing our own working class for the revolutionary struggle in America.
