

On Workers Democracy

by Ernest Mandel

[Roger Garaudy, one of the leading intellectuals of the Communist party of France, visited Belgium November 5 to give a lecture on "May 1968 in France," at the request of the Communist Student Union of Brussels University. It was not surprising that radical students considered a lecture on this topic by a representative of the French CP as a provocation.

[In any case, when the meeting started, a few dozen Maoists carrying portraits of Chairman Mao and anarchists carrying a black flag persistently tried—for the most part successfully—to prevent Garaudy from addressing the audience.

[A confused debate followed in which the question of whether Garaudy should be allowed to speak was mixed with the question of whether or not a revolutionary situation had existed in France in May.

[Finally, the Maoists and anarchists ended the debate by pushing Garaudy out of the meeting hall.

[This incident raised serious questions about the norms of democratic debate and behavior in the working

class and socialist movement. In answer to some of the questions raised, Ernest Mandel, the well-known Marxist economist and editor of the Belgian socialist weekly *La Gauche*, wrote an article on the subject of workers democracy which appeared in two parts in the November 16 and November 23 issues of *La Gauche*. Because of the timeliness of the topic, we are reproducing the article below. The translation is by *Intercontinental Press*.]

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The lamentable incidents which occurred at the ULB [Universitaire Libre de Bruxelles—Free University of Brussels] when Garaudy came to speak there have induced me to explain once again why we adhere to the principles of workers democracy.

Workers democracy has always been a basic tenet of the proletarian movement. It was a tradition in the socialist and communist movement to firmly support this principle in the time of Marx and Engels as well as Lenin and Trotsky. It took the Stalinist dictatorship in the USSR to shake this tradition. The temporary victory

of fascism in West and Central Europe also helped to undermine it. However, the origins of this challenge to workers democracy are deeper and older; they lie in the bureaucratization of the large workers organizations.

The Social Democratic and trade union bureaucrats were the first to begin to undermine the principles of workers democracy. They started calling general membership meetings at infrequent intervals. Then they began to rig them, or often to do away with them altogether. They began likewise to restrict or abolish freedom of discussion and criticism within their organizations. They did not hesitate even to appeal to the police (including the secret police) for help in fighting revolutionary minorities. At the time of the first world war, the German Social Democracy set a dismal example of collusion with the state repressive forces. In subsequent years, the Social Democrats everywhere followed this example.

The Soviet bureaucracy first and then the bureaucrats in the Stalinist Communist parties (or in trade unions





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under Stalinist leadership) simply followed the pattern established by the Social Democrats, extending it further and further. They abolished freedom of discussion and of tendencies. Slander and lies replaced argument and debate with opponent tendencies. They made massive use of physical force to prevent their opponents from "causing any harm." Thus, the entire Bolshevik old guard which led the October Revolution and the majority of the members of Lenin's Central Committee were exterminated by Stalin during the dark years of the Great Purge (1935-38).

The young generation of anti-imperialist and anticapitalist militants now developing a revolutionary consciousness are spontaneously returning to the traditions of workers democracy. This was apparent in France in May and June when freedom of speech for all tendencies was jealously safeguarded in the assemblies of students and revolutionary workers and students. But this new generation is not always conscious of all the principled and practical reasons for workers democracy.

This is why the youth can be vulnerable to a kind of Stalinist-derived demagoguery being spread by certain pro-Chinese sects, which seek to make people believe that workers democ-

racy is contrary to "the interests of the revolution." Therefore, it is necessary to reaffirm these reasons strongly.

The workers movement fights for the emancipation of the proletariat. But this emancipation requires the abolition of *all* forms of exploitation to which the workers are subjected. Rejecting workers democracy means quite simply that you want to maintain a situation like the one today in which the masses of workers are unable to make their opinions heard.

The Marxist critique of bourgeois democracy starts from the idea that this democracy is only *formal* because the workers do not have the material means to exercise the rights which the bourgeois constitutions formally grant all citizens. Freedom of the press is just a formality when only the capitalists and their agents are able to get together the millions of dollars needed to establish a daily newspaper.

But the conclusion that follows from this critique of bourgeois democracy, obviously, is that means must be created enabling *all* the workers to have access to the media for disseminating ideas (printing presses, meeting halls, radio and television, posters, etc.). If, on the contrary, you conclude from this that only a self-proclaimed "leading party of the proletariat" — or even a little sect which declares that it alone

is "genuinely revolutionary" — has the right to speak, to use the press, or to propagate its ideas, then you risk increasing the political oppression of the workers rather than abolishing it.

The Stalinists often reply that abolition of the capitalist system equals emancipation of the workers. We agree that abolition of private ownership of the means of production, of the profit economy, and of the bourgeois state are essential conditions for the emancipation of the workers. But saying that these are "essential" conditions does not mean that they are "sufficient." Because as soon as the capitalist system is abolished, the question arises of who is going to run the factories, the economy, the municipalities, the state, the schools and universities.

If a single party claims the right to administer the state and the society; if it imposes a monopoly of power by terror; if it does not permit the mass of workers to express their opinions, their criticisms, their worries, and their demands; if it excludes the workers from administration — then it is inevitable that a widening gulf will develop between this omnipotent bureaucracy and the mass of workers.

Then, emancipation of the workers is only a deception. And without real workers democracy in all areas, including freedom of organization and



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Then, emancipation of the workers is only a deception. And without real workers democracy in all areas, including freedom of organization and

press, real emancipation of the workers is impossible.

These principled reasons are reinforced by practical ones. Like all social classes in history, the working class is not homogeneous. It has common class interests, both immediate interests and historical interests. But this *community* of interests is interwoven with *differences* which have various origins—immediate special interests (professional, group, regional, craft interests, etc.) and different levels of consciousness. Many strata of the working class have not yet become conscious of their historical interests. Others have been influenced by bourgeois and petty-bourgeois ideologies. Still others are weighed down by the burden of past defeats and failures, of skepticism, or of the degradation caused by capitalist society, etc.

However, the capitalist system cannot be overthrown unless the entire working class is mobilized in action against it. And this unity in action can only be obtained if these various special interests and levels of consciousness can be expressed in, and little by little neutralized through, debate and persuasion. Denying this diversity can only result in a breakdown of unity in action and in driving successive groups of workers into passivity or into the camp of the enemy.

Anyone with experience in strikes has been able to see in practice that the most successful actions are prepared and conducted through numerous assemblies, first of the unionized workers and later of all the workers concerned. In these assemblies, all the reasons in favor of the strike can be developed, all opinions can be expressed, and all the class enemy's arguments can be exposed. If a strike is launched without the benefit of such democracy, there is much more risk that many workers will observe it halfheartedly, if at all.

If this is true for an isolated strike, it holds all the more for a general strike or for a revolution. All the great revolutionary mobilizations of the workers—from the Russian revolution to the revolutionary upsurge of May and June 1968 in France and including the German and Spanish revolutions, to cite only these examples—have been characterized by ver-

itable explosions of workers democracy. In these instances, many working-class tendencies coexisted, expressed themselves freely in speeches and in the press, and debated before the entire class.

The word "soviet"—council of workers delegates—expresses this unity of opposites—the *unity* of the workers in the diversity of their tendencies. In the Second Congress of Russian Soviets, which took power in the October Revolution, there were a dozen different tendencies and parties. Every attempt to repress this workers democracy—by the Social Democracy in Germany, by the Stalinists in Spain—has presaged, if not expressed, a setback or defeat for the revolution.

The absence of workers democracy not only hampers unity in action, it also obstructs working out a correct political line.

It is true that the workers movement has an excellent theoretical instrument to guide it in the often extremely complicated twists and turns of economic, social, and political struggles—revolutionary Marxism. But this tool must still be used correctly. And no one person has a monopoly on its correct application.

Without any doubt, Marx and Lenin were geniuses. But life and history ceaselessly pose new problems which cannot be solved simply by turning to the scriptures. Stalin, who was considered by many honest Communists before his death to be "infallible," in reality committed many errors, to say nothing of crimes, some of which— as in agricultural policy—have had pernicious consequences for three decades for the entire Soviet people. Mao Tse-tung, whom other naive souls also consider "infallible," endorsed the policy of Aidit, the leader of the Indonesian CP, up until the eve of the military coup d'etat. This policy was at least partially responsible for the deaths of 500,000 Indonesian Communists and workers.

As for the myth that the Central Committee of a party is "always right," or that the majority of this committee is "always right," Mao himself rejected it in the famous resolution passed by the CC of the CCP [Chinese Communist party] on the "cultural revolution" in April 1967.

But if no person or group has a monopoly on truth and wisdom, then

discussion is *indispensable* to determine a correct political line. Rejection of discussion under any pretext (and the pretext that a political opponent is "counterrevolutionary" or an "enemy agent" is as old as bureaucracy), or substituting epithets or physical violence for debate, means condemning oneself to remain the victim of false ideas, inadequate analyses, and errors with debilitating if not catastrophic consequences.

Marxism is a guide to action, they often say. That is true. But Marxism is distinguished from utopian socialism by its appeal to *scientific* analysis. It does not focus on action per se. It focuses on action which can influence historical reality, which can change it in a given direction—in the direction of socialist revolution, toward the emancipation of the workers and of all humanity.

Out of the clash of ideas and tendencies, the truth emerges which can serve as a guide to action. Action inspired by "monolithic," bookish, and infantile thought—which is not subjected to the uninhibited criticism possible only in a climate of workers democracy—is condemned to certain failure. It can only result, in the case of small groups, in the disillusionment and demoralization of individuals; in the case of unions or larger parties, in defeats for the class; and where the mass of the workers is concerned, in defeats with a long train of humiliations, privations, and impoverishment, if not casualties.

Often these arguments in favor of the principles and practice of workers democracy are countered in Stalinist circles by the assertion that workers democracy cannot be extended to the "enemies of socialism" inside the workers movement. Curiously, certain groups which claim to be antibureaucratic and very left take a similar line to justify booing and hissing or resorting to physical violence as a substitute for debate with their political opponents.

Both the Stalinists and the ultra-leftists cry: "You don't argue with revisionists, capitalist forces, and the representatives of the enemy." In practice, the Stalinists try to replace debate by repression, if not murder and the use of tanks against the workers (from the Moscow Trials to the intervention in Hungary and Czechoslo-

vakia). The ultraleftists limit themselves more modestly to preventing Garaudy from speaking, doubtless until the dreamed-of day when they can use more "effective" means modeled on the Stalinist ones. . . .

Of course, the working-class bureaucracies objectively act in the interests of capital, primarily by channeling the workers' periodic revolutionary explosions toward reformist outlets and thereby blocking opportunities to overthrow capitalism. They play the same role by influencing the workers on a day-to-day basis in favor of class collaboration, undermining their class consciousness with ideas taken from the bourgeois world.

But the objective function and role of these bureaucracies is not confined to maintaining class peace. In pursuing their routine reformist activities, they come in conflict with the everyday interests of capitalism. The wage increases and social welfare laws won by the reformists—in exchange for their pledge to keep the workers' demands within limits that do not threaten the bases of the system—reduce the capitalists' profits somewhat. The trade-union organizations which they lead inject the collective power of labor into the daily relationships between the bosses and the workers. And as a result, these conflicts have an altogether different outcome from the past century, when the strength of the trade unions was slight or nonexistent.

When the capitalist economy is flourishing, the bourgeoisie is willing to pay the price represented by these concessions in return for "social peace." But when the capitalist economy is in a bad way, these same concessions rapidly become unacceptable to the bourgeoisie. Then, it is in the capitalists' interest to eliminate these organizations completely, even the most moderate and reformist ones. The very existence of the unions becomes incompatible with the survival of the system.

This shows the real nature of the reformist bureaucracy in the workers movement. This bureaucracy is not composed of owners of capital who buy labor power in order to appropriate surplus value. It is composed of salaried employees (of the workers organizations or the state) who vacillate and waver between the camp of

capital and of the proletariat, sometimes leaning toward one, sometimes toward the other, depending on their particular interests and the pressures to which they are subjected. And, in facing the class enemy, the vanguard workers have every reason to do their utmost to force these bureaucrats to return to their camp. Otherwise, the common defense would be greatly weakened.

Overlooking these elementary truths leads to the worst of catastrophes. The workers movement learned this to its cost during the rise of fascism. At that time, the "genius" Stalin invented the theory of "Social Fascism." According to this theory there was no difference between the "revisionist" Social Democrats and fascists. It was even proclaimed that the Social Democracy had to be defeated *before* the struggle against the Nazis could be won.

While the Social Democratic and Communist workers were happily bashing each other's heads in—the reformist leaders shared the responsibility this time equally with their Stalinist counterparts—Hitler came to power, massacred thousands of worker militants, and dissolved all the workers organizations. Thus, he made possible a temporary, if somewhat embittered, reconciliation between the Social Democrats and the Communists . . . in the concentration camps. Would it not have been better, while not making any concessions in the ideological struggle against revisionism, to fight together against the Nazis and prevent them from taking power?

On an infinitely smaller and less tragic scale, the situation in the university can lead to a dilemma of the same type overnight. All the left tendencies are fighting to gain recognition of their right to carry on "political activities" on the campus. But it is quite possible that the administration will take the incidents surrounding Garaudy's visit as a pretext for banning any more political lectures. What other course, then, is there but to fight together to win minimum political freedom in the university? Would it not be preferable to respect the rules of workers democracy from now on, since they conform to the common interests of the workers movement and the student confrontation movement?

In 1957, in response to the official revelation of Stalin's crimes made at the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist party (which he approved of at the time), Mao Tse-tung stressed the necessity of distinguishing carefully between how to settle differences among the people—by persuasion, debate, practical experience—and how to proceed in conflicts with the class enemy. Here he was only implicitly reaffirming the need to uphold workers democracy "among the people."

But this distinction has meaning only if it is based on *objective* criteria. The capitalists (and in less industrialized countries, the landlords) are the enemy. The people are the mass of producers, white-collar workers, and, in semicolonial countries, the poor peasants.

If subjective criteria ("Anybody who doesn't support every one of my tactical turns is a capitalist and a counterrevolutionary, even if he served as president of the People's Republic of China and vice-chairman of the Chinese Communist party for twenty years!") are substituted for these objective criteria, then you fall into complete arbitrariness. You end, of course, by wiping out the distinction between "contradictions among the people" and "conflicts with the class enemy," treating the former more and more like the latter.

Of course, it is impossible to make an absolute and total separation between the two. Marginal cases are possible. We advocate frank debate in meetings of strikers. We do not think that we need restrict ourselves to polite discussion with strikebreakers.

In every marginal case, however, we must distinguish acts (or crimes) from opinions and ideological tendencies. Acts must be proved and judged according to clearly established, well-defined criteria of the workers' interest (or after the overthrow of capitalism, of socialist legality) so as to prevent arbitrariness. Failure to distinguish between acts and opinions can only result in extinguishing workers democracy, lowering the level of consciousness and mobilization of the workers, and progressively robbing the revolutionists themselves of their ability to orient themselves politically. . . . □