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# The communist left and internationalist anarchism, Part 2: On the difficulties of debating and the ways to overcome them

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In the [first part of this new series of articles](#) <sup>[1]</sup>, we tried to show that there are fundamental points of agreement between the internationalist anarchists and the communist left. For the ICC, without denying that important differences exist, the crucial thing is that we are all determined defenders of workers' autonomy, since we refuse to give our support *"even in a 'critical' or 'tactical' way, or in the name of the 'lesser evil', to a sector of the bourgeoisie - whether the 'democratic' bourgeoisie against the 'fascist' bourgeoisie, or the left against the right, or the Palestinian bourgeoisie against the Israeli bourgeoisie, etc. Such an approach has two concrete implications:*

1. *Rejecting any electoral support or cooperation with parties which manage the capitalist system or defend this or that form of this system (social democracy, Stalinism, 'Chavismo', etc)*
2. *Above all, during any war, it means maintaining an intransigent internationalism, refusing to choose between this or that imperialist camp."* ('The Communist Left and Internationalist Anarchism', Part one, WR 336)

All those who defend these essential positions in theory and practice need to be aware that they belong to the same camp: the camp of the working class and the revolution

Inside this camp, there are necessarily differences of opinion and position between individuals, groups and tendencies. It is by debating on an international scale, openly, fraternally, but also firmly, without making any false concessions, that revolutionaries can best participate in the general development of proletarian consciousness. But in order to do this, they have to try to understand the origin of the difficulties which still stand in the way of such a debate.

These difficulties are the product of history. The revolutionary wave which began in 1917 in Russia and 1918 in Germany put an end to the First World War but it was defeated by the bourgeoisie. A terrible counter-revolution descended on the working class in all countries, the most monstrous expressions being Stalinism and Nazism – precisely in the two countries where the proletariat had been in the forefront of the revolutionary tide.

For the anarchists, the establishment, by a party which claimed to be marxist, of a terrifying police dictatorship in the country of the October revolution was seen as a confirmation of the criticisms it had always made of marxist ideas, reproaching them for their 'authoritarianism' and 'centralism', for not calling for the immediate abolition of all forms of the state the day after the revolution, for not making the principle of Liberty their number one value. At the end of the 19th century, the triumph of reformism and of 'parliamentary cretinism' within the Socialist parties had already been seen by the anarchists as confirmation of the validity of their refusal to take any part in elections<sup>[1]</sup>. It was very

similar following the triumph of Stalinism. For them, this regime was just the logical consequence of the 'congenital authoritarianism' of marxism. In particular, they saw a continuity between the policies of Lenin and those of Stalin, since, after all, political terror had already developed when Lenin was still alive, and indeed not long after the revolution.

Obviously, one of the arguments given to prove this 'continuity' is the fact that, as early as spring 1918, certain anarchist groups in Russia were repressed and their newspapers shut down. But the 'decisive' argument was the bloody crushing of the Kronstadt uprising in March 1921 by the Bolshevik power headed by Lenin and Trotsky. The Kronstadt episode was obviously very significant because the workers and sailors of this naval base had been in the vanguard of the October 1917 insurrection which overthrew the bourgeois government and allowed the soviets (the workers' and soldiers' councils) to take power. And it was precisely this most advanced sector of the revolution which had rebelled in 1921, raising the slogan 'power to the soviets, not the parties'.

### **The communist left and the Russian experience**

Inside the communist left, there is full agreement among its different tendencies on these obviously essential points:

- recognition of the bourgeois, counter-revolutionary role of Stalinism;
- rejection of any 'defence of the workers' bastion', the USSR, and in particular the rejection of any participation in the Second World War in the name of defending the USSR or on any other pretext;
- the characterisation of the economic and social system in the USSR as a particular form of capitalism, state capitalism in its most extreme form.

On these three decisive points, the communist left is thus in agreement with the internationalist anarchists but is totally opposed to the Trotskyists who considered the Stalinist state to be a 'degenerated workers' state', the Communist Parties to be 'workers' parties' and who, in their great majority, enlisted in the Second World War (mainly in the ranks of the Resistance)

On the other hand, within the communist left, there are notable differences in understanding the process which led from the 1917 revolution to Stalinism.

Thus, the Dutch left current (the 'council communists' or 'councilists') consider that the October revolution was a bourgeois revolution whose function was to replace the feudal Czarist regime with a bourgeois state more capable of developing a modern capitalist economy. The Bolshevik party, which was at the head of this revolution, is itself seen as a bourgeois party of a particular type, charged with establishing a kind of state capitalism, even if its militants and leaders were not really conscious of this. Thus, for the 'councilists' there is indeed a continuity between Lenin and Stalin, the latter being, in some way, the 'executive heir' of the former. In this sense there is a certain convergence between the anarchists and the councilists, although the latter did not give up their reference to marxism.

The other main tendency of the communist left, the one which descends from the Italian left, considered that the October revolution and the Bolshevik party were proletarian in nature<sup>[2]</sup>. The framework that this tendency puts forward for understanding the victory of Stalinism is the isolation of the revolution in Russia – the result of the defeat of the revolutionary struggles in other countries, above all Germany. Even before the October revolution, the whole workers' movement, and the anarchists were no exception, thought that if the revolution didn't extend onto the world scale, it

would be defeated. But the fundamental historical element which illustrated the tragic destiny of the Russian revolution was that this defeat didn't come from the 'outside' (the White armies, supported by the world bourgeoisie, had been beaten) but from the 'inside', through the working class losing power, above all losing all control over the state which had arisen in the wake of the revolution, as well as through the degeneration and betrayal of the party which had led the revolution, through its integration into this state.

Having said this, the different groups who claim descent from the Italian left don't all share the same analyses on the policies of the Bolsheviks during the early years of the revolution. For the 'Bordigists', the monopoly of power by a political party, the establishment of a form of monolithism in the party, the use of terror and even the bloody suppression of the Kronstadt revolt are not to be criticised. On the contrary, they still fully endorse such policies; and given that internationally the Italian left current has largely been known about through the 'Bordigists', this has served to repel a lot of anarchists from the communist left.

But the Italian left current cannot be reduced to Bordigism. The Left Fraction of the Communist Party of Italy (which later became the Italian Fraction of the Communist Left) undertook a whole work of drawing up a balance sheet of the Russian experience (the name of its French review was *Bilan* or Balance Sheet). Between 1945 and 1952, the Gauche Communiste de France (which published *Internationalisme*) carried on this work and the current which was to form the ICC in 1975 had already taken up its torch in Venezuela in 1964 and France in 1968.

This current (and also a current within the Partito Comunista Internazionale in Italy) considered it vital to criticise certain aspects of Bolshevik policy from the very beginning of the revolution. In particular, many of the elements which the anarchists denounce, the taking of power by a party, the terror, and in particular the repression of Kronstadt, are seen by our organisation (following on from *Bilan* and the GCF) as errors, even crimes committed by the Bolsheviks which can perfectly well be criticised from a marxist standpoint, and even from the standpoint of Lenin, notably his *State and Revolution* written in 1917. These errors can be explained in various ways which we can't go into here, but which are part of the general debate between the communist left and the internationalist anarchists. Let's just say here that the essential reason is the fact that the Russian revolution was the first (and to this day the only) historical experience of a proletarian revolution which was momentarily victorious. But it is up to revolutionaries to draw the lessons of this experience as *Bilan* sought to do in the 1930s. For *Bilan* "a deep understanding of the causes of the defeat" was a fundamental requirement. "And this understanding cannot permit any taboo or ostracism. Drawing the balance sheet of the post war events is thus the way to lay the bases for the victory of the proletariat in all countries" (*Bilan* no. 1, November 1933)

## The anarchists and the communist left

Periods of counter-revolution are not at all favourable to unity or even cooperation between revolutionary forces. The disarray and dispersion which affects the working class as a whole also has repercussions on its most conscious elements. Among the groups who had broken with Stalinism while still defending the October revolution, debate was not easy in the 20s and 30s, and discussion between the communist left and the anarchists was particularly difficult throughout the period of counter-revolution.

As we saw above, the fact that the outcome of the Russian revolution seemed to provide grist to the mill of its criticisms of marxism meant that the dominant attitude within the anarchist movement was to reject any discussion with the 'inevitably authoritarian' marxists of the communist left. And this was all the more true given that in the 1930s the anarchist movement was much better known than

the small groups of the communist left, largely because of the key position occupied by the anarchists in Spain, where one of the most decisive historical events of this period took place.

At the same time, while the anarchist movement generally considered that the events in Spain were a confirmation of the validity of its ideas, the communist left saw them above all as proof of their failure, and this for a long time made collaboration with the anarchists very difficult. We should however bear in mind that *Bilan* did not put all the anarchists in the same pot: for example, they published a tribute to the Italian anarchist Camillo Berneri when he was murdered by the Stalinists in May 1937. Berneri had made an intransigent criticism of the policies carried out by the leadership of the Spanish CNT.

More significant was the fact that in 1947 there was a conference which brought together the Italian communist left (the Turin group), the Gauche Communiste de France, the Dutch left and a certain number of internationalist anarchists. One of them even presided over the conference. This shows that even during the counter-revolution, certain militants of the communist left and of internationalist anarchism were animated by a real spirit of openness, showing a will to discuss and an ability to recognise the fundamental criteria which unite revolutionaries above and beyond their differences. These comrades of 1947 give us a lesson and hope for the future[3].

Obviously, the atrocities committed by Stalinism in the usurped name of marxism and communism still weigh very heavily today. They function as an emotional wall which gets in the way of sincere debate and loyal collaboration. The tradition of the - murdered – generations weigh like a nightmare on the brains of the living, as Marx put it in *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. This wall will not be demolished overnight. However, it is starting to crack. We have to continue the debate which little by little is developing in front of our eyes, maintaining a fraternal atmosphere and always keeping it in mind that we are all sincerely working towards the goal of communism, of a classless society. **ICC August 2010**

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[1]. For Lenin, “*In Western Europe revolutionary syndicalism in many countries was a direct and inevitable result of opportunism, reformism and parliamentary cretinism*” (Lenin’s preface to a pamphlet by Voinov (Lunacharsky) on the party’s attitude towards the unions - 1907). Anarchism, which had existed well before revolutionary syndicalism but was close to it, also benefited from the evolution of the Socialist parties in this direction

[2]. We should note that there were several groups who came out of the Bolshevik party which had the same analyses. See our book *The Russian Communist Left*.

[3] In fact, debate, co-operation and mutual respect between internationalist anarchists and communists were not something new at that point. Among other examples, we can refer to what the American anarchist Emma Goldman wrote in her autobiography (published in 1931, ten years after Kronstadt):

*“Bolshevism was a social conception taken up by the shining spirit of men animated by the ardour and courage of martyrs...it was extremely urgent that the anarchists and other genuine revolutionaries should take up the resolute defence of these defamed men and of their cause in the*

*events which broke out in Russia*" (*Living my Life*, translated from the French edition). Another very well known anarchist, Victor Serge, in an article written in August 1920, 'The anarchists and the experience of the Russian revolution' adopted a very similar tone and while still referring to himself as an anarchist and criticising certain aspects of Bolshevik policy, continued to support this party. For their part, the Bolsheviks invited a delegation from the anarcho-syndicalist CNT in Spain to the second congress of the Communist International. They held very fraternal discussions and invited the CNT to join the International.

## Historic events:

- [Kronstadt](#) [2]

## Deepen:

- [Left communism and internationalist anarchism](#) [3]

## Political currents and reference:

- [Internationalist anarchism](#) [4]

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