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Tony Cliff

Notes on democratic centralism

(June 1968)

IS internal document, June 1968.

Reprinted in Tony Cliff, **Neither Washington nor Moscow**, Bookmarks, London 1982, pp. 215–7.

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Our group has for a long time been a purely propaganda organisation – publishing books, theoretical journals, holding schools, etc. The structure fitting this situation was a loose federative one; all branches were like beads on a string.

Over the last year or two we have moved towards agitation. This demands a different kind of organisational structure. A revolutionary combat organisation – especially if it becomes a party – needs a democratic centralist structure.

In the first International the Proudhonist and the Bakuninists (both Anarchists) wanted a federal structure. Hence logically they argued that the International was a working-men's organisation, and only workers should be its members and representatives.

Marx argued that as the prevailing ideology under capitalism is the ideology of the ruling class, revolutionary politics *does not* reflect the current ideas of the class. As there cannot be a revolutionary movement without a revolutionary theory, the leadership of the International would not necessarily be workers, and could not be delegates on a federative principle (hence, Marx was the “Russian representative” on the General Council of the International although he was not a Russian nor had he ever been in Russia; hence also the Central Committee of the

Bolshevik Party had only one worker and all members were from one city; the same applied to the Mensheviks, to Luxemburg's Spartakusbund, etc.).

The Federal Principle – the idea that the Executive of a revolutionary organisation should be made up of one delegate per branch – is untenable:

(a) It is undemocratic.

If a branch has 50 members who divide on a central issue 26 to 24, what is democratic about one person casting the votes of 50?

If a minority of the whole organisation – let us say 20 per cent – has one set of policies separating it from the majority – it will not be represented at all – or at most by a derisory number of people on the Executive.

(b) The inner-organisation struggle of ideas that is so vital, will be directed from issues to organisational frustrations and combinatorialism.

(c) The Organisation cannot grow beyond a certain size: with 1,000 members and let's say 100 branches, no Executive could work.

(d) It is incompatible with the cell structure: the latter should be small and tight (it will probably replace the branch as the unit of work and education).

(e) It is incompatible with specialisation and division of labour. As Marx and Engels, Lenin and Trotsky, Luxemburg and Liebknecht were too busy to be able to be involved in local branch activities they could never have been eligible for election to the Executives of any revolutionary organisation.

(f) In conclusion: the federal structure is unstable and inefficient.

(In our own terms, with the expansion of the Group and the transition to a cell structure, half the Political Committee, including the editor of our agitational weekly, would not be able to be on the Executive, as they might be inactive locally in a branch. A revolutionary organisation whose two top Committees – the Executive and the Political Committee – are elected on opposite principles, could not work effectively.)

A democratic centralist organisation is based on the following:

A Delegates Conference – meeting once or twice a year – decides the policies – the principles and strategy of the organisation.

An Executive, Political Committee, etc., are elected by the, Conference as individuals, or on a list of candidates where there are factional groupings: each group of delegates is entitled to elect the number of people to the Committees in proportion to their share at the Conference.

All decisions of Conferences and between Conferences of the Executive are binding on all members of the organisation.

A revolutionary combat organisation faces the need for tactical decisions – daily and hourly – hence the need for great centralisation.

The most important decision for a revolutionary party – the decision to take State power – was taken by the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party; in a revolutionary situation one cannot afford to waste a day (not to say a month – the time necessary to organise a Conference). The decision on War or Peace – the Brest-Litovsk discussion – was again taken by the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party. Or again the historical statements of the First International on the Paris Commune were written by Marx and agreed by a handful of people who turned up to the meetings of the General Council – without reference to the national sections of the International, not to speak of their mass rank and file.

If a minority of the branches – let us say 20 per cent – find it necessary to call an Emergency Conference – the Executive is bound to carry this out. New decisions and new elections can ensue. [1]

In practice because of the size and uneven nature of IS, we have to have a transitory structure: from federalism to democratic centralism.

At present all branches with ten members or more have a member on the Executive except for three branches: E. London, Croydon and Richmond. I suggest the addition of one from each of these branches.

The London Regional Committee – covering some half of the members of IS – should be strengthened. (It could organise demonstrations, schools, etc. The fact that it is based on a delegate per branch does not guarantee its functioning.)

Meetings of comrades in specific fields should be convened (as the teachers do regularly).

Two-way communication is vital: up to now there is much more information going from the EC and Administrative Committee to branches, than in the opposite direction. Criticism and self-criticism is absolutely vital. Above all, more politics, more theory, are necessary, hence the need for more centralism. (The worst “economism” and organisational frustrations have come about in many local activities that were completely autonomous.) (Of course, any arrangement the September Conference decides should not run for more than a few months, as the IS – 800 or

so at present – is bound, we hope, to grow considerably.)

Footnote

1. In arguing against Democratic Centralism anarchists and Social Democrats say: “But see, the Bolshevik Party with such a structure led to Stalinism.” It was the lack of Bolshevism in Germany and elsewhere that led to the isolation of the Russian revolution and hence to the rise of Stalinism. (See especially Cliff, **Rosa Luxemburg**, pp. 63–4)

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Last updated on 3 February 2017