

On the crisis of the SWP (Britain): Is Leninism finished?

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Do revolutionary parties, like the Socialist Workers Party, that draw on the method of organising developed by Lenin and the Bolsheviks still fit in the twenty first century? Alex Callinicos challenges the critics and argues that Leninism remains indispensable.

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The demise of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and of the political tradition that it seeks to embody have been widely proclaimed on the British left in recent weeks. Thus the columnist Owen Jones has announced that “the era of the SWP and its kind is over.” Is he right?

The flood of attacks on the SWP originates in some internal arguments that culminated in our annual conference in January. The conference discussed a difficult disciplinary case. But wider political differences emerged. Two factions were formed in the lead-up to the conference to fight for changes in the model of democratic centralism - the system of decision making used by organisations in the revolutionary Marxist tradition - that the SWP has developed.

These issues were argued out in vigorous political debates at the conference, and the positions put forward on democratic centralism by the outgoing Central Committee (the main party leadership) were approved by large majorities. Unfortunately, a small minority refused to accept these decisions. Through a series of leaks and briefings some ensured that a highly distorted account of the disciplinary case was circulated on the web and taken up by some of the mainstream media.

The minority has used this coverage to argue that the SWP was now “toxic” and to make a variety of demands - for example, a special party conference to nullify the decisions just taken, the censure or removal of the newly elected Central Committee, and various changes to the party’s structure.

One thing the entire business has reminded us of is the dark side of the Internet. Enormously liberating though the net is, it has long been known that it allows salacious gossip to be spread and perpetuated - unless the victim has the money and the lawyers to stop it. Unlike celebrities, small revolutionary organisations don’t have these resources, and their principles stop them from trying to settle political arguments in the bourgeois courts.

Moreover, in this case a few individuals, some well known, others not, have used blogs and social media to launch a campaign within the SWP. Yet they themselves, for all their hotly proclaimed love

of democracy, are accountable to no one for these actions. They offer an unappetising lesson in what happens when power is exercised without responsibility. All of this would be of interest solely to the SWP and its supporters, were it not for the political conclusions that are being drawn. Both Owen Jones and "Don Mayo", an ex-member of the SWP leadership who recently left the party, have targeted what "Mayo" calls "the orthodox Trotskyist model of Leninism". Like Jones, he says this is "an historically outdated model" [1].

Marxist tradition

So what's at stake here? The SWP has sought, since its origins in a handful of people expelled from the Trotskyist Fourth International in 1951, to continue the revolutionary Marxist tradition. Started by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, this tradition reached its highpoint in the Russian Revolution of October 1917, when the Bolshevik Party led the first and still the only successful working class revolution. Leon Trotsky, who with Vladimir Lenin headed the Bolsheviks in October 1917, then fought the degeneration of the revolution with the rise of Stalin's tyranny between the mid-1920s and the early 1930s.

What does continuing a tradition mean? There are plenty of sects, Stalinist as well as Trotskyist, who think this involves the mindless repetition of a few sacred formulas. But genuinely carrying on a tradition requires its continuous creative renewal. Marxism is about the unity of theory and practice so this process of renewal has both intellectual and political dimensions.

The theoretical development of Marxism requires above all deepening and updating Marx's critique of political economy. His target was the capitalist economic system: in his masterwork *Capital* he uncovered its structural logic. But capitalism develops historically, and, as it does, so must Marxist analysis. In the SWP we have contributed to this process, most recently with Chris Harman's great last work *Zombie Capitalism* - not alone, however. There is a great renaissance of Marxist political economy under way at present that can help political activists understand what's happening to capitalism during its greatest crisis since the 1930s.

But Marx's political legacy - the necessity of working class organisation to overthrow capital - is less secure. In 1968 the SWP's predecessor the International Socialists decided to adopt a Leninist model of organisation. In other words, we decided to take our reference point in how we organise the way the Bolsheviks organised under Lenin's leadership in the years leading up to the October Revolution.

Flexible tactics

In fact, as Tony Cliff (the founder of the SWP) showed in his biography of Lenin, the Bolsheviks were very flexible in their political tactics and organisational methods. But there were some common factors. Most fundamentally, as has been confirmed by subsequent experience, workers' struggles have again and again developed into revolutionary movements that challenge the very basis of capitalist domination.

But the same experience also shows that these revolutionary movements tend to be held back by traditions that represent a compromise between resistance to and acceptance of the capitalist system. Historically the most important of these traditions has been reformism, whether in the shape of mainstream social democracy or the Western Communist Parties after Stalin's triumph. But there are other ideologies embodied in organisations that have played a similar role - social Catholicism in Poland during the great Solidarnosc movement in 1980-1, or variants of Islamism in Iran in 1978-9

and Egypt today.

The hold of these traditions on workers is reinforced by the way in which the workings of capitalism tend to fragment their consciousness and encourage them to think in terms of the interests of a smaller section rather than the class as a whole. And so major working class struggles, from the Paris Commune of 1871 to the Great Miners' Strike of 1984-5 in Britain, have ended in heroic and inspiring defeats once the question of political power is posed. The reason why the experience of October 1917 is so significant is because here the Bolsheviks succeeded in breaking the grip of the reformists (in this case the Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries), which had been overwhelming in the months after the overthrow of Tsarism in February 1917, and winning the active support of the majority of workers for the conquest of power.

What this involved was the Bolsheviks acting as what is sometimes called a "vanguard party". They represented for most of their existence before October 1917 a small minority of the Russian working class. But this minority was united by a shared Marxist understanding of the world. And, above all, it organised and acted on the basis of this understanding.

The Bolsheviks collectively intervened in the struggles of the Russian working class. In doing so, they put forward proposals that would help to advance the struggle in question. But they simultaneously sought to encourage workers to recognise that they had to fight for political power and, to achieve this, to support the Bolshevik Party itself.

So the Bolsheviks won the majority of the working class through a continuous process of dialogue between them and their fellow workers, in which they sometimes changed their minds, learning from workers who had actually moved ahead of them. But in this process the party sought to overcome the uneven experiences of different groups of workers and the way capitalism fragmented their consciousness.

How the Bolsheviks organised as revolutionaries became obscured with the degeneration of the October Revolution, which developed as a result of the isolation of the new workers' republic and the disintegration of the working class itself caused by civil war and economic collapse. When we rallied to Leninism in the late 1960s we were trying to apply this original model. But renewing Leninism wasn't simple. In the first place, we faced different conditions from those confronting the Bolsheviks: reformism, rooted in the trade union bureaucracy, was far more entrenched in Britain and the rest of Western Europe than it had been in Tsarist Russia.

Escalating struggle

Secondly, these conditions were changing. From 1968 onwards we were able to turn ourselves towards a wave of escalating workers' struggles that culminated in the fall of Ted Heath's Tory government in early 1974. The picture was the same in the rest of Western Europe: this was the era of May 1968 in France and the Italian "hot autumn" of 1969. But then in the mid-1970s everything began to change. The Labour government of 1974-9 was able to halt the rising tide of workers' militancy and to incorporate rank and file workers' leaders into managerial structures.

Then in 1979 Thatcher came to office. She successfully renewed the capitalist offensive that Heath had attempted and defeated the miners and other key groups of workers. Her administration and that of Ronald Reagan in the United States marked a global turning point. The neoliberalism they pioneered sought to revive the profitability of capital above all by fragmenting the working class and weakening its organisations. Its effects were contradictory: as the present global economic crisis shows, it failed to resolve the underlying problems of profitability, but workers did emerge more

divided and with less effective organisations.

This doesn't mean that resistance to capitalism has vanished - far from it. The Arab revolutions were fundamentally caused by the effects of neoliberalism in polarising societies such as Egypt, Syria and Tunisia. But certain trends are visible.

First of all, the mainstream political organisations of the working class continue to decline. The Italian Communist Party - in its prime the largest Western party - has vanished almost without trace. The social democratic parties have tried to adapt to neoliberalism by moving rightwards and embracing the market - the project of New Labour under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown.

But not only did this end in disaster (Brown's devil's pact with the City helped to bring about the 2008 financial crash), but the base of the social liberal parties (as many now call them) in a more fragmented working class has continued to shrink. This doesn't mean that reformism is finished: François Hollande beat Nicolas Sarkozy in last year's French presidential elections and Labour is running ahead of the Tories in the opinion polls. But it's weaker.

Secondly, we have seen since the Seattle protests of November 1999 waves of political radicalisation directed at neoliberalism and sometimes at capitalism itself. The great protests against the invasion of Iraq whose tenth anniversary we are about to celebrate were a high point. In 2011 the Arab revolutions helped to stimulate first the 15 May movement in the Spanish state and then the Occupy movement that spread from Manhattan around the world.

These movements are tremendously important. But they have not led to or been sustained by workers' struggles that have reached a similar level of generalisation or intensity. Of course, workers have been playing an important role - think of the pensions strikes here in Britain on 30 June and 30 November of the same year, of the general strikes and other workers' struggles in Greece, or of the strike across southern Europe on 14 November 2012.

Streets or factories?

The fact remains that, while an insurgent working class was at the centre of the radicalisation of the late 1960s and early 1970s, so far this is not true today. Even in Egypt, where the struggle today is most advanced, the movement on the streets has been more central than the movement in the factories in the two years since Hosni Mubarak was overthrown. What conclusions should we draw from this?

It would be ridiculous to assert that the working class is finished. The neoliberal era has seen a contradictory and uneven expansion of capitalism that has drawn wider social layers into the net of wage labour. The struggles that I have referred to (and there are many others - for example in the new centres of capital accumulation such as China and Vietnam) represent the learning experiences of a working class that has been restructured to meet the changing demands of capital. There's no reason why they should repeat the pattern of the upturn of the late 1960s and early 1970s, any more than they did those of earlier waves of working class struggle.

Nevertheless, one consequence of the form taken by the present radicalisation is that the centrality of workers' struggles in the fight against capitalism is less obvious than it was in the past. This is one reason why - along with the atrophy of the mainstream political parties as they are drawn deeper and deeper into the corporate world - contemporary anti-capitalist movements tend to be suspicious of political organisations. The burden of proof is on those of us who still think Leninism is the best form for revolutionary organisation to show why this is so.

This is the serious question raised by the polemic launched by Owen Jones and his like. Jones seems to be stating his alternative when he writes, "Britain urgently needs a movement uniting all those desperate for a coherent alternative to the tragedy of austerity, inflicted on this country without any proper mandate."

This sounds very nice but is quite misleading, since Jones is an increasingly high profile member of the Labour Party. And indeed he writes, "so long as trade unions ensure Labour is linked to millions of supermarket checkout assistants, call centre workers and factory workers, there is a battle to be won in compelling the party to fight for working people."

In other words, although Jones is critical of Ed Miliband for failing to "offer a genuine alternative to austerity", he thinks that activists should devote their energies to pushing Labour leftwards. This is a project that generations of activists have pursued since the 1920s (indeed Jones says his parents met as members of the Militant Tendency, which fought valiantly to win Labour to socialism till most were expelled during the 1980s).

The nature of the Labour Party

The failure of the struggle to win Labour for the left isn't a matter of lack of effort or determination. The very nature of the Labour Party defeats its left wing challengers. It is geared to the electoral cycle, so that discussion of policy and support for struggle are subordinated to the effort to win votes on terms set by the Tories and the corporate media. Miliband's opposition to the pension strikes is just the latest in a long and sad story of betrayals by Labour leaders that goes back to Ramsay MacDonald during the 1920s and Neil Kinnock in the 1980s.

The power of the parliamentary leadership has historically been buttressed by the social weight and financial muscle of the trade union bureaucracy. Today the union presence still ties Labour to the organised working class, but at a price. The role of full-time trade union officials is to negotiate the terms on which workers are exploited by capital. Sometimes this leads them to take action, as they did on 30 November 2011, but only in order to improve their bargaining position. The subsequent betrayal of the pensions struggle is therefore absolutely typical.

So the trade union bureaucracy is a conservative force within the workers' movement. But, far from addressing this problem, Jones is currently campaigning for the re-election of Len McCluskey as general secretary of Unite. McCluskey talks a good fight, but he sat by while other union leaders killed off the pensions strikes. He has also thrown Unite strongly behind Labour under Miliband. This is why the SWP conference voted to support the campaign of Jerry Hicks to challenge McCluskey as a candidate committed to strengthening the rank and file.

Despite his radical rhetoric and the excellent stance he takes in the media on specific issues, Jones is defending an essentially conservative position, lining up with Labour and the trade union leaders. "Mayo" represents an apparently more radical option. He aligns himself with some other former leading members of the SWP, Lindsey German, John Rees and Chris Bambery, in arguing that the mass movements that have developed since Seattle represent an alternative to Leninist politics.

But if we look at the movements against neoliberal globalisation and imperialist war that developed at the start of the millennium, we see that they had an astonishing global impact, but failed to sustain themselves. The same proved true of Occupy, which emerged very rapidly as a worldwide symbol of anti-capitalist resistance - and then equally rapidly dissipated.

There are various reasons for this pattern. Probably the most important is the absence of a sustained

revival of working class militancy, which would give a social weight to the protest spectacles offered by the movements. But the situation hasn't been helped by the domination of the anti-capitalist movement by "horizontalist" hostility to political parties and by unworkable (and ultimately undemocratic) methods of decision-making based on consensus.

When "Mayo" and his like renounce Leninist politics and uncritically embrace the movements they are evading these problems. They are equally shifty when it comes to confronting the biggest problem facing the progress of resistance to austerity in Britain - the role of the trade union leaders in blocking strike action. Like Jones, "Mayo" and his co-thinkers are backing McCluskey on the grounds that he "is no bureaucrat". Neither they nor Jones are offering an alternative to the dominant forces inside the British workers' movement.

United fronts

But maybe the SWP is just too hopelessly sectarian to provide the basis of this alternative. Yet Jones pays us a curious if back-handed tribute: "The SWP has long punched above its weight. It formed the basis of the organisation behind the Stop The War Coalition, for example, which - almost exactly a decade go - mobilised up to two million people to take to the streets against the impending Iraqi bloodbath. Even as they repelled other activists with sectarianism and aggressive recruitment drives, they helped drive crucial movements such as Unite Against Fascism, which recently organised a huge demonstration in Walthamstow that humiliated the racist English Defence League."

So the SWP is awful, but it has played a crucial role in the most important movements of the past decade. How can this contradiction be resolved? In reality we are committed to the politics of the united front. In other words, we will work, in a principled and comradely way, with political forces well to our right to build the broadest and strongest action for common if limited objectives - for example, against the "war on terror" or the Nazis. We have followed the same practice in Unite the Resistance, an important alliance of activists and trade union officials to campaign for strikes against the coalition.

Moreover, what our critics dislike most about us - how we organise ourselves - is crucial to our ability, as Jones puts it, to punch above our weight. Our version of democratic centralism comes down to two things. First, decisions must be debated fully, but once they have been taken, by majority vote, they are binding on all members. This is necessary if we are to test our ideas in action.

Secondly, to ensure that these decisions are implemented and that the SWP intervenes effectively in the struggle, a strong political leadership, directly accountable to the annual conference, campaigns within the organisation to give a clear direction to our party's work. It is this model of democratic centralism that has allowed us to concentrate our forces on key objectives, and thereby to build so effectively the various united fronts we have supported.

But this model is now under attack from within and without. Scandalously, a minority inside the SWP are refusing to accept the democratically reached conference decisions. What they, and some other more disciplined and more reflective comrades are arguing for is a different model involving a much looser and weaker leadership, internal debate that continually reopens decisions already made, and permanent factions (currently factions are only allowed in the discussion period leading up to the annual party conference). If they succeeded, the SWP would become a much smaller and less effective organisation, unable to help build broader movements.

The stakes in these debates are very high. The New Anticapitalist Party (NPA) in France imploded in

2011-12, leading to a very serious breakaway to the Front de Gauche led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon. This has weakened the far left in Europe, and indeed the rest of the world. The implosion was caused by political differences and setbacks, but it was exacerbated by an internal regime very similar to the one advocated by some SWP members. All the debates within the NPA went through the filter imposed by the struggle between four permanent factions. Members' loyalties focused on their factional alignments rather than the party itself.

I am confident that the SWP is politically strong enough to overcome its internal differences. Our theoretical tradition and our democratic structures will allow us to arrive at the necessary political clarity and to learn the lessons of the disciplinary case. But if I am wrong and the SWP did collapse, this would not solve the political problem that it exists to address. The anti-capitalist struggle won't be advanced by relying on Labourism and the trade union leaders or by uncritical worship of the movements. If the SWP didn't exist, it would be necessary to invent it.

Alex Callinicos, January 2013

P.S.

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<http://www.socialistreview.org.uk/article.php?articlenumber=12210>

Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF (article 27610), [Crisis in the British SWP: Why I resigned](#).