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Kali Akuno on Lenin's Vanguard Party

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The following is a transcript of a live Q&A session with Kali Akuno hosted on Twitter by Black Socialists of America (@Black-Socialists) on October 10, 2018. We found the discussion valuable and hope to offer more content like this. See below for the original tweets and videos.

Q: What do you think of the Leninist idea that the vanguard seizing the state in the name of the working class is the first step towards Communism? If skeptical, what ideas are salvageable from this? If supportive, what can be done to ensure a better revolution?

Kali Akuno: This is, I think, an essential one and needs to be addressed. First off, let say that I think Lenin is still one of the geniuses that the movements has produced. That does not mean that he is infallible or set up by any means of the imagination what we should be following just blindly or without criticism. We have to match things up with the facts that exist

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and the realities that exist and develop strategies based upon the conditions and the time and place that we are in. This is a critical thing and I think one of the things that he [Lenin] demonstrated in practice and that is worth emulating whether you agree with him or not.

That said, getting into the point around strategy, let me say unequivocally that the bourgeoisie is not going to surrender its power and control over our lives without a fight. We should all be clear about that. The question really is: How are we going to organize ourselves to win the fight and how are we going to organize ourselves more importantly to transform our society?

That I think is the essential question and I think if we look at what happened in the Soviet Union and some of the other experiences of the 20th century we see the party was good for seizing power but not for transforming relations and that what we have to get to.

We have to seriously study in some detail – I think this generation in some great detail – the revolutionary movements of the 19th and 20 century, starting at really looking at and evaluating the great Haitian Revolution and I think we find some patterns there that go deeper than just the question of the Leninist model. We see some repeats in history. I think if you really look at the Haitian Revolution and in particular some of the conflicts and contradictions in the political thought of Toussaint L'Ouverture on the one hand and Jean-Jacques Dessalines on the other, and how they were both analyzing the situation and what were the prospects and road going forward.

What you'll find there is outside of both them being generals and being in militarized structures you'll find some parallels between some aspects of what's being questioned as the Leninist model. But beyond that you just see the larger dynamic of the questions they had to face: How was this laboratory project going to survive surrounded by enemies, constantly being threatened with invasion, and how was it going to both meet the needs of its people but defend the gains that they had made?

And this is a question that all of the movements in the 19th century definitely had to confront but also the 20th century. I think the form that Lenin came up with dealt with part of the question but what you also see in the Haitian example is once they obtain power they did not know how to transform the relations of production, they did not know how to change society in that way – this is our challenge.

Obviously looking at history, I would argue, that you can't wait until some party claiming to be revolutionary seizes power to try to start ushering in the social transformation. It has to be done, I would argue, long before those forces make a real contest for power. But that contest is going to have to be made. That part I think we need to all be very clear about and I would love to argue that with anybody.

That said, one of the key things in my thinking and evolution has always been to really look at how various traditions have sought to do the self-organizing of the class: to both seize the means of productions but also usher in new ways to socially reproduce ourselves and to make ourselves into better humans who live in harmony with the environment. And for that I think we have to draw upon the many varied traditions of the left – anarchism, anarcho-syndicalism, the ecology movement and it's different threads. These are all things that are going to be needed I think for us to really usher in a serious transformation that's about ending the sixth extinction which we are going through, directly confronting the calamity of climate change and its threat to all of complex life forms on this planet, not just to humans. This is where I think many of the practices of the social and solidarity economy are important for us to really take seriously and to adopt. And some of the folks who have been best at upholding that tradition, at least over the last 50 to 60 years, have actually been anarchists and this is something we have to look at.