

Against Leninism

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A major influence on radical thinking since the Russian revolution is the form of radical politics called *Leninism*. The name derives from the central role of the Bolshevik leader V.I. Lenin in shaping the direction of the Bolsheviks in the revolution. The political legacy of Leninism is directly at odds with syndicalism, as we'll see. But what is Leninism? To understand this, I think we need to look at the *practice* of the Bolshevik party in the revolutionary process in Russia and Lenin's role in shaping that practice.

The practice of the Bolsheviks during the Russian revolution had a major impact on the thinking of many militants in the labor and radical movements in the 1920s and '30s. The Bolshevik leadership in Russia sought to bring radicals in other countries under their leadership as part of their strategy to defend the Russian revolution. The Bolsheviks in Russia had changed their party name to "Communist" in 1918 to differentiate themselves from the reformist electoral socialist parties in western Europe. They encouraged their supporters in other countries to form "communist" parties on the model of the Bolshevik party in Russia.

In that period the world syndicalist movement was the major revolutionary force in working class circles outside Russia. This led to a period of debate and political conflict between syndicalists and Communists. About 1919 the Communists set out to win over syndicalist militants to the Communist movement. The Red International of Labor Unions (RILU) was set up in 1921 with the aim of drawing in the syndicalist unions. This initiative was mostly a failure. The suppression of the Russian syndicalist movement in 1921 and the syndicalist critique of Bolshevik practice led to the creation of a syndicalist international in 1922 — the International Workers Association.

“A Party of a New Type”

A key feature of Leninism was the conception of the role of the party — a “party of a new type,” as the Leninists called it. Charlie Post has described this aspect of Leninism this way:¹

“Put simply...the enduring legacy of Leninism remains the goal of constructing an independent organization of anti-capitalist organizers and activists who attempt to project a political alternative to the forces of official reformism not only in the unions, but in mass, extra-parliamentary social struggles.”

Post notes the difference of Bolshevik practice from the western European electoral socialist parties. The latter were built as “mass parties” to accept varying levels of working class participation — as voters or union members, or as activists, or officials. These parties developed powerful bureaucratic layers — the elected politicians and party apparatus, and the paid officials of unions, presiding over collective bargaining with employers. This bureaucratic layer was the basis of the reformism of these parties. Their defense of their institutional position in capitalist society led them to restrain the level of conflict, keeping the working class captive to capitalism.

Due to the tsarist police state, a mass party was not possible in Russia. Thus, the Bolshevik party was built more on the “militant minority” of activists and organizers among workers and military rank and file.

The term “militant minority” was originally coined by syndicalists in the early 1900s. This was understood to refer to more active, “class conscious” workers who have developed organizing skills, hold political ideas critical of the system, and have a certain influence among their

¹ <https://spectrejournal.com/leninism/>

fellow workers on the job. The idea of forming an independent, ideologically-defined organization of the “militant minority” from the various struggles was advocated by anarchists and syndicalists who were called “dual organizationalists.” This means that they see a role for two kinds of organization: an “organization of tendency” based on a defined politics, in addition to the mass organizations such as the unions. The practice of forming ideologically-specific anarchist or syndicalist groups to influence unions, train organizers, issue publications and so on was already well-entrenched in the early 20th century among libertarian socialists of the “dual organizationalist” variety. Thus there were various “organizations of tendency” in that era, such as Nosotros in the Spanish CNT in the 1930s or the Turin Libertarian Group, active in building the radical shop stewards movement in Turin in 1919–1920.

A politically defined “militant minority” organization can bring activists, organizers and publicists together from the different threads of social struggle — to share experiences, and help people from one sector to understand the issues of the oppressed in a different area. The “organization of tendency” can encourage discussion so that people can develop greater cohesion or unity across different areas of struggle. Through publications and workshops they can engage in useful popular education, and help to train people as organizers and effective participants in struggle. Militant minorities with a revolutionary aspiration for change can help popularize the case for replacing capitalism, and can help to encourage strategic thinking in mass organizations and movements. For syndicalists, participation in mass organizations built on a grassroots basis such as worker-controlled unions forms a kind of bridge that enables the radical “militant minority” to connect their ambitious agenda for change to the grievances and struggles of working people. However, Leninists go beyond these ideas. For Leninists, the role of the party is to gain hegemony in the mass movements and use this as a basis for gaining a monopoly of government power for its party.

Power to the Bureaucratic Control Class

To understand the conflict between syndicalism and Leninism, it’s useful to look at a Leninist writer who tries to interpret the politics in a democratic way. An example is the pamphlet *The Future Socialist Society*² by John Molyneux — a former member in the British Socialist Workers Party. Molyneux puts forward the idea that power would be gained in a revolutionary situation by democratic worker councils — assemblies of delegates elected from the various workplaces. Syndicalists would agree with this. The role of the worker councils in the Russian revolution of 1917 was the reason syndicalists in other countries were initially enthusiastic supporters of the revolution. Molyneux writes:

“The democracy of workers’ councils will be based on collective debate and discussion and on the ability of the electors... to control their representatives. The mechanism of this control will be very simple. If delegates do not represent the will of their electors they will simply be recalled and replaced by mass meetings in the workplaces...”

Different political parties, providing they accept the basic framework of the revolution, will operate freely within the councils, with the party which has the majority

² <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/molyneux/1987/future/index.html>

support from the workers forming the government. In all likelihood this will be the party which has led the revolution.”

In this democratic interpretation of Leninism, the party’s control of “the government” is to be derived from democratic worker councils. But what is this “government” that is separate from the worker congresses? In the Russian revolution the Council of People’s Commissars was “the government” but it simply took over the old tsarist state bureaucracies and was in practice not under the control of democratic multi-party soviets. Moreover, problems emerge when Molyneux starts to talk about how socialization of the economy will occur:

“The formal mechanism through which economic power will be established is...nationalization..... the progressive takeover of the main firms and industries. Small businesses employing only one or two workers can mostly be left to later. The immediate task is to gain control of the decisive levers of economic power, of the ‘commanding heights’...”

However, the creation of worker councils or congresses to control the society is not likely to happen without a widespread organized worker movement in the various industries — with mass organizations like unions, and elected shop steward councils and worker assemblies. But if there is this mass movement for worker power there in the workplaces, why can’t this movement begin the process of socialization of industry from below? The syndicalist view is that socialization can be built directly by working people through the grassroots worker organizations taking over the industries, and creating their own democratic control of production.

The Leninist program of “nationalization” from above suggests a program of bureaucratic centralization of control over the economy. The usual idea of nationalization is where a state creates a corporate-style managerial command structure with workers subordinate to this control bureaucracy. Thus Molyneux’s conception of the process of takeover of industry by a “government” through “nationalization” is in practice likely to prevent any real worker control in industry. In fact it will set the stage for the emergence of the bureaucratic control class (as I call it) as the dominant class in a new class-divided mode of production. It’s useful to look at how this played out in the Russian revolution.

The Fate of “Worker Control”

Throughout the period from the March 1917 revolution into 1918 there were many cases where workers seized control of factories. The push for this came from the factory committees. These were grassroots organizations based on election of rank-and-file delegates by the worker assemblies — similar to the grassroots shop stewards’ councils in a number of western European countries in that era. In the period between November, 1917 and March, 1918, 836 enterprises were seized by the worker organizations. Typically, the factory committee became a worker administrative council, and the workers or the local soviet declared the factory “nationalized” and appealed to the central government for financial support.

Lenin had written a “worker control” decree in November, 1917. But Lenin’s concept of “control” was simply workers acting as a check on management — requiring management to “open the books,” exercising a veto on hiring and firing, and other controls. Lenin was not advocating

for workers to take over collective self-management of the factories. Nonetheless, the worker control decree encouraged workers to go further because they now believed that their efforts would gain official sanction. Workers didn't put too much stock in the boundary Lenin drew between control and management.

Out of this upsurge of worker takeovers came the first attempt by the factory committee movement to form its own national organization, independent of the trade unions and political parties. In December the Central Soviet of Factory Committees of the Petrograd Area published a Practical Manual for the Implementation of Workers' Control of Industry. The manual proposed that "workers control could rapidly be extended into "workers management".

The fate of the factory committee movement was fought out at the first All-Russian Congress of Trade Unions in January, 1918. The main Russian political tendency with a vision for direct workers management were the anarcho-syndicalists, who were supported by the SR Maximalists. The syndicalists proposed "that the organization of production, transport and distribution be immediately transferred to the hands of the toiling people themselves, and not to the state or some civil service machine made up of one kind or another of class enemy." G.P. Maximov — national secretary of KRAS — distinguished between horizontal coordination and hierarchical control of the economy:

"The aim of the proletariat was to coordinate all activity...to create a center, but not a center of decrees and ordinances but a center of regulation, of guidance — and only through such a center to organize the industrial life of the country."

The Bolshevik and Menshevik delegates voted "no."

Lenin and Trotsky did not support workers management of industry. Their preference for top-down, centralized state planning and control in industry by managerialist bureaucracies worked itself out as the revolution progressed. The first move towards creating a system of top-down central planning was a decree on December 5, 1917, setting up the Supreme Council for the National Economy (*Vesenkha*). This body was staffed with Bolshevik trade union officials, party stalwarts and such — all appointed from above. This council would eventually evolve into the elite Soviet central planning body, Gosplan.

During 1918 Lenin began beating the drum for the elimination of elected worker administrative councils and the imposition of "one-man managers" appointed from above. On April 28 Lenin's case for adoption of Taylorism and for "one-man management" was laid out in "The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government." To deal with the need for "economic revival," Lenin called for the kinds of managerial control techniques used in capitalist firms to squeeze workers. The measures he proposed included a card system for measuring the output of every worker, and creation of a labor bureau to fix the required productivity of each worker. These standards were not to be decided by the workers.

What is Taylorism? "The work of every workman," wrote Taylor, should be "fully planned out by management...not only what is to be done, but how it is to be done and the exact time allowed for doing it." Separating out planning and conceptualization and decision-making from the work was a strategy for management gaining more control over how the work is performed and how much time it takes to do the work. Thus we see that the subordination of workers to management power is inherent to the aim of Taylor's "scientific management." And Lenin was blunt in his advocacy of building a top-down managerialist autocracy to control workers in production. Lenin:

“The irrefutable experience of history has shown that...the dictatorship of individual persons was very often the vehicle, the channel of the dictatorship of revolutionary classes...Large-scale machine industry — which is the material productive source and foundation of socialism — calls for absolute and strict unity of will...How can strict unity of will be ensured? By thousands subordinating their will to the will of one...*Unquestioning submission* (emphasis in original) to a single will is absolutely necessary for the success of labor processes that are based on large-scale machine industry...today the Revolution demands, in the interests of socialism, that the masses *unquestioningly obey the single will* (emphasis in original) of the leaders of the labor process.”

“Leaders of the labor process” is a euphemism for the bosses who occupy the positions of managerial authority. What we see here is Lenin adopting an outlook characteristic of the bureaucratic control class. As the 1930s Spanish revolution showed, “large-scale machine industries” (textile mills, metal-working plants, railways) were quite capable of being collectively managed by the workers through things like a coordinating council of elected and revocable delegates, inclusion of engineers as advisors on worker delegate councils, and workplace assemblies to decide issues of discipline or deciding on the work organization or over-all program.

Moreover, all studies of actual worker control of production show that it leads to greater productivity and increased morale. Workers are most familiar with the problems that occur in the work and are capable of working out solutions. Moreover, direct participation in the making of the decisions is part of building up the personal capacity of the working class —part of worker self-liberation from the regime of class oppression.

A factor that probably contributed to Lenin’s thinking here is a blindspot in the Marxist theory of that era. Marxism failed to predict or account for the growth of the bureaucratic control class (as I call it) as an oppressor class over workers. This is the class of middle managers, supervisors, and high end professionals who are part of the whole bureaucratic apparatus for controlling labor, corporations and the state within capitalism. The institutional power of the bureaucratic control class is not based on ownership; rather, their power is rooted in the monopolization of decision-making authority (and forms of expertise directly related to the decision-making control) in social production and the state.

This hole in Marxism probably contributed to the failure to see how a managerialist conception of “building socialism” would build a new mode of production based on the power of the bureaucratic control class over the working class. In *The State and Revolution*, Lenin suggests the managerial apparatus built up by capitalism can be simply taken over for building socialism:

“A witty German Social Democrat...of the last century called the postal service an example of the socialist economic system. This is very true. At present the postal service is a business organized on the lines of the state-*capitalist* monopoly. Imperialism is gradually transforming all trusts into organizations of a similar type...But the mechanism of social management is here already to hand. We have but to overthrow the capitalists,...to smash the bureaucratic machine of the modern state — and we shall have a splendidly-equipped mechanism, freed from the “parasite,”...To organize the whole national economy on the lines of the postal service, so that the technicians, foremen, bookkeepers, as well as *all* officials...all under the control and leadership of the armed proletariat — this is our immediate aim.”

“Leadership of the armed proletariat” is a euphemism for the state controlled by the vanguard party. Lenin believed that the Bolsheviks could take over the managerialist bureaucracies built up by capitalism and convert them to socialist use by replacing the capitalist “parasites” (the owners) with the “workers state” (the state controlled by the so-called “workers party”).

As I noted earlier, hundreds of enterprises had been taken over by workers from below in 1917–1918, and by 1918 these enterprises were being managed by the elected worker committees. By the fall of 1920, 82 percent of these enterprises were being run by “one-man managers” appointed by higher authorities.

Worker Power or the “Dictatorship of the Party”?

With the Russian civil war drawing to a close at the end of 1920, the immediate danger posed by foreign embargo and civil war had ended and now the trade union base of the party was pushing for a greater say in the running of the economy. This debate would come to a head at the Communist Party congress in March, 1921. The Workers Opposition proposed to invoke an All-Russian Producers Congress to control planning of the national economy, with the various industrial unions electing the management boards of their respective industries.

Lenin denounced the Workers Opposition proposal as a “syndicalist deviation”: “It destroyed the need for the Party. If the trade unions, nine-tenths of whose members are non-Party workers, appoint the managers of industry, what is the use of the Party?” Here we see how the Leninist concept of the “dictatorship of the party” directly contradicts the concept of workers managing the industries they work in. Mouthing another of his sophisms, Lenin said: “Does every worker know how to rule the country? Practical people know that these are fairy tales.”

Both Lenin and Trotsky appealed to “the dictatorship of the party” in their attack on proposals for “industrial democracy” by Bukharin and the Workers Opposition. Here is Trotsky:

They have made a fetish of democratic principles. They have placed the workers right to elect representatives above the Party. As if the Party were not entitled to assert its dictatorship even if the dictatorship temporarily clashed with the passing moods of the workers democracy...The dictatorship does not base itself at every given moment on the formal principle of workers democracy.

What is the basis of this *apriori* “historical birthright” to a “party dictatorship” which Trotsky speaks of? Why does it have primacy over the “workers democracy”? The Bolsheviks seemed to hold an *apriori* belief that socialism can only be created through a state controlled by people who are masters of Marxist theory. They assumed *apriori* that their interpretation of Marxism was the only real expression of working class interests. As Maurice Brinton³ put it:

“In the minds of the Bolsheviks the Party embodied the historical interests of the [working] class whether the class understood it or not — and whether the class wanted it or not. Given these premises, any challenge to the hegemony of the Party...was tantamount to “treason” to the Revolution...”

³ <https://libcom.org/article/bolsheviks-and-workers-control-state-and-counter-revolution-maurice-brinton>

So any political tendency that disagreed with the Communists must represent the interests of an “alien class.” And since the class of farmers and small business people (“petit bourgeoisie”) was the only such class that was numerous, any political tendency opposed to them must be “petit bourgeois.” This dogmatic *apriori* argument became an excuse for suppressing other left-wing political tendencies. As S.A. Smith writes: “The Bolsheviks did not hesitate to reorganize or shut down soviets that fell under control of forces they dismissed as ‘petty bourgeois.’”

After defeat of the Workers Opposition at the party congress in 1921, the party central committee determined that the Confederation of Russian Anarcho-Syndicalists (KRAS) was the most dangerous dissident revolutionary group in Russia. They were particularly worried about syndicalist propaganda among the Red Army instructor’s units and the potential of KRAS to recruit members of the Workers Opposition. By the end of 1921, KRAS had been suppressed and its leading militants were in prison.

On my interpretation, Leninism has three defining features:

- The building up of an ideologically specific organization based on recruitment from the “militant minority” in unions and social movements, and working to gain hegemony for their tendency in social struggle
- Securing a monopoly of state power for the Leninist party, suppressing other political tendencies
- Centralizing the party’s control over the economy through top-down central planning and setting up corporate-style managerial hierarchies over “nationalized” industries.

Leninists will try to justify Bolshevik suppression of other socialist political tendencies in the Russian revolution or imposition of “one-man managers” from above by referring to the “dire circumstances” faced by the Bolsheviks in 1917–21. I think we can interpret this as a kind of argument for the Leninist program, as follows:

“There is likely to be extreme conflict and disruption in a revolutionary crisis. Achieving victory requires a group with the toughness and internal unity to centralize control of the economy and armed power in its hands. This is why there needs to be power in the hands of a single party that centralizes control of the economy via central planning and nationalization.”

The Bolsheviks may have achieved “victory” for their party but they did not achieve victory for the working class. Their program led directly to consolidation of a mode of production in which the bureaucratic control class presides as an oppressor class over workers.

The Syndicalist Alternative

Moreover, syndicalism proposes an alternative revolutionary program. We believe our program does a better job of addressing the conflict and disruption of a revolutionary crisis. This program was partially (but not fully) carried out in the Spanish revolution and we can gain insights from that experience. The widespread seizure of workplaces, and bringing them together into industry federations, was the program called “socialization” by the Spanish syndicalists. They

also worked to build a “proletarian army” directly controlled by the mass worker organizations, the unions. This program has significant advantages:

- Workers have the skills to do the work and worker control ensures that people’s needs can be met.
- Workers can break the power of the bureaucratic control class, by replacing the old corporate-style management with control through worker assemblies, elected coordinating councils, and beginning the process of building new training and education to enhance worker skills for mastery over production.
- Workers can begin the process of changing the technology for greater ecological sustainability and compatibility with worker health.
- Workers can bring the various workplaces together into worker-controlled industrial federations to “take wages and conditions out of competition.”
- The various industry federations can be brought together for overall social governance and economic coordination through congresses of elected worker delegates.

In the Spanish revolution there was a revolutionary syndicalist tendency in the CNT who held that the unions “must take power,” as the Nosotros group put it in July, 1936. This worker power tendency proposed that the unions in Catalonia and at national level replace the existing Popular Front governments with worker congresses and “defense councils” consisting of delegates from the union or workplace assemblies. The left-wing unions would be drawn into a united front. The defense councils were to provide direction for a unified proletarian army, under control of the unions. Eduardo de Guzman, editor of the CNT’s Madrid daily paper, said the goal was “a proletarian government — total working-class democracy in which all sectors of the proletariat — but of the proletariat alone — would be represented.”

A civil war situation is dire. But rather than seeing it as justifying repression of other tendencies, we can see it as a motivation for building a united front. A situation of that sort does put great pressure on people to come to an agreement. To the extent democratic mass worker organizations are a dominant force in the revolution, this makes it more likely workers will end up in control when the smoke clears. Leninism is a sure fire recipe for working class defeat.

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