

The Workers' Advocate

Supplement



50¢

Vol. 7 #7

VOICE OF THE MARXIST-LENINIST PARTY, USA

August 20, 1991

Some theoretical questions concerning Soviet history

The following speech to the Fourth National Conference points to some of the theoretical issues that are being investigated in the MLP's study of Soviet history. It seeks to provide an overview, while final conclusions have yet to be reached. It has been revised for publication by its author.

Additional studies concerning industrialization and collectivization and a bibliography of sources will appear later in the Supplement.

Fourth National Conference, MLP, USA
Fall 1990

At our Third Congress [Fall 1988], we had a valuable discussion on the theory of socialism [See *On the Party-wide Study of the Marxist-Leninist Concept of Socialism* in the January 15, 1989 issue of the *Supplement*]. We dealt with a number of theoretical questions that came up from the national study program. One of the most important things from this discussion was the posing of the concept of what we described as "weak socialism," or the period of transition to a more complete socialism which Marxism describes as the first stage of communism. This theoretical point cuts against the revisionist forgery of socialism. It also strengthens the theoretical framework for looking at Soviet history. That was part of the value of our criticism of the type of analysis presented by Tony Cliff and the IS ["International Socialists tendency"] Trotskyists and which the Swedish group [around the journal *Red Dawn*] took up. In our critique of Soviet history we must avoid being sidetracked by abstract moral judgments, outside of time and place, outside the process of transition from capitalism to socialism, from the old world to the new.

Since the Third Congress, work has continued. We have just about finished extracting quotations from Lenin [this is taking longer than expected]. There has been quite a bit of research on war communism, the New Economic Policy (NEP), and the period of the first Five Year Plan (including collectivization and the industrialization drive). Unfortunately, much of this is still in a raw and incomplete state.

As we slog deeper into this work, there has been a series of theoretical problems that we have bumped into. Completing further stages of the research on the history

will facilitate resolution of these theoretical problems, or at least shed more light on them. So this work will continue. However, since this work will still take quite awhile, and since the Central Committee and the other comrades involved in this work may be grappling with these things for some time, we want to bring some of these issues to the conference. We want to keep comrades informed of where this work is headed and of some of the theoretical problems that we think it poses.

Some words of warning about this presentation. First, it only touches a few within the complex of theoretical issues posed by this history. The work has already posed a number of other issues, and further work will pose different issues and the same issues differently, hopefully more all-sidedly and clearly. But these are some of the key issues that we are focusing on at this time. Second, these issues are linked to what we are calling our "working hypotheses" about how the history went, and sorting through the theoretical implications of these things is only yet at its initial stages. Third, because work is at a more primitive stage than we would like, the Central Committee has only been able to talk over some of the outlines of these theoretical issues. Which means a number of the particular formulations or examples are my own, and lack the honing or

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shoot 'em, jail 'em". The war on crime is not about crime but about intimidating the poor and minority working people.

If the rich and the government really wanted to fight crime, they could start by doubling the minimum wage, restoring drug treatment programs and job programs. They could stop discriminating against minority youth. They could clamp down on the 300 billion dollars a year that American banks launder for the drug business. But all this would cut into the profits of the wealthy people who run the government. Moreover crime and the drug trade are a useful tool for the wealthy to divide the poor and keep them in fear.

Mass Active Resistance is the Only Defense

The black and Latino workers have suffered the worst of the Reagan-Bush offensive. But the poverty and police brutality that the black people suffer today is what the rich have in mind for wider and wider sections of the people as American capitalism sinks deep into crisis.

Working class people of all colors must stand up to this growing police terrorism. Mass active resistance is the only effective defense. The investigations and commissions of the government will never bring justice. After Hector Morales was shot there were several demonstrations and even some confrontations with police. People demanded an end to police brutality and racism and that the government provide jobs for the youth. There was also a protest march when Nathaniel Lackland was shot. These are hopeful signs that the resistance movement is growing. □

Some theoretical questions concerning Soviet history

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revamping that further collective discussion will provide.

In this presentation I am going to touch on the following topics:

First, there are two economic questions,

— The New Economic Policy and its international or general significance for the theory of transition from capitalism to socialism.

— The meaning of state capitalism under workers' rule.

Second, there are three political questions about proletarian power,

— Smashing the old state machine.

— The commune or soviet-type of state.

— Some questions of workers democracy.

Finally, an interrelated but separate point on inner-party life and the question of factionalism.

Let's begin with the first question about the New Economic Policy.

NEP and Its International (general) significance

Our discussion at the Third Congress shed light on the need for transitional steps towards socialism, a period described as "weak socialism", and so forth. This was put in general terms along the lines that such things as distribution by wages and money are not categories of a socialist economy, but under proletarian rule they may be features of an economy in transition. In examining Soviet history, the idea of "transition to socialism" or "weak socialism" gets fleshed out. It gives examples of at least what early steps are involved, in the conditions of peasant, ruined Russia.

The first years of Soviet power, with the collapse of war

communism and then the advent of NEP, provide food for thought. What in this is particular to 1920s Russia? What has general significance for the theory of transition to socialism?

In 1917 and early 1918, before and immediately after power, Lenin and most of the leading Bolsheviks aimed at quite limited inroads on capital as first steps towards abolishing capitalist relations. The civil war accelerated everything. The capitalists, even quite small owners, were expropriated. A number of what were considered to be socialist elements were introduced. Attempts were made to run factories by central authority for the needs of the war and the masses irrespective of profit. There were efforts to curtail or abolish most trade and to introduce socialist distribution among workers in the form of food, clothing and fuel rations in exchange for work. (There was even talk at this time of abolishing money altogether).

So how does one assess the economics of War Communism? Part was simply emergency contingencies of the war itself. Part was impulse from below, mainly from the factory workers who sought to smash up capitalist relations as far as possible. Part was a series of policies and decrees from the Bolshevik leaders (with Lenin usually showing more caution than most) who viewed that the time for a full onslaught on capitalism had arrived and for going over to socialism.

NEP came in Spring 1921. It was recognition that such a view was mistaken. The direct attack on capitalism could not be sustained and the economic foundations of socialism were not yet in place. The economy was in a shambles. Every attempt to revive it along organized or state channels was overwhelmed by the black market, petty and peasant production. This forced a retreat all along the line.

The main reform of NEP was allowing the peasantry to sell their products on the market. Money economy was restored for the workers too. Small capitalist production

was restored, with such things as leasing out the small grain mills or coal mines to former owners. There were plans to run larger plants through concessions and joint agreements with both domestic and foreign capitalists. Even the state-owned enterprises were to be run on what they called corporate principles (which among other things meant that they now had to make a profit, or close down, layoff workers, etc.).

In explaining why the NEP was necessary, the focus was on the peasantry, on the need to link up with and make concessions to the vast petty production in countryside. But it was not limited to this. Lenin and the Communist International also asserted that the NEP had general significance, even for countries like Britain without much peasant farming. It seems this is correct. The socialist reorganization of the economy has to take into account such things as the majority of the population being involved in private farming, as in the Russian case. But beyond that, it also has to take into account the extent of other types of petty-bourgeois relations, which are still large even in countries like the US. As well, it has to take into account the level of class consciousness and the extent of organization among the workers themselves.

This is not to say that every country will duplicate NEP. But that the new working class power will, at first, have to make some agreement, some link with at least small commerce and small production: with the extent of concessions to capitalist relations being greater or lesser given the conditions. This is also in line with the sketch of transition to socialism that we find in Marx and Engels.

The questions don't end there. For example, NEP in Russia was an unstable agreement at best. By the late 20s, it landed in a full-blown crisis with heavy consequences. This convulsive breakdown of the NEP situation needs more looking into: Was it unavoidable? Would a different policy have made possible a smoother and more advantageous going over from NEP to something else? Does the late 20s crisis of NEP also have general significance? More broadly, how does the working class steer from an NEP-type situation towards socialism and not towards a new capitalism (either through a direct victory of the capitalist and petty economy, or through state capitalism)?

State capitalism

A related question of transitional steps towards socialism is the celebrated question of "state capitalism" under workers' rule. This too was not just a Russian phenomenon, but has general import for socialist theory. In particular, it is important for analyzing the "weak socialism" that was discussed at the Third Congress.

State capitalism is a broad term that covers a lot of ground. Presumably, it covers any economic combination of capitalist relations with the state. There is the run of the mill Amtrak or Conrail variety. There is the more complex and complete state capitalist systems in the revisionist countries. In both cases we are speaking here of capitalist

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relations under capitalist rule. Then there is also the transitional situation where the workers set up their state power and are set with the task of remolding, rechanneling the still existing capitalist relations. This also can take a multitude of forms, from various types of state regulation to the relations existing within the state economy itself.

From 1918 on, Lenin wrote a number of articles and speeches that touch on these issues, especially at the time of the trade union debate around the Tenth Congress [of the Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik)] in 1921. For Lenin, state capitalism was to be the means to overcome the economic chaos, get the factories working again, restore the link with the peasant economy, and pave the way for socialist relations. In the discussions at this time, a number of Bolshevik leaders were reluctant to use the phrase "state capitalism" in this way. Apparently they were shy of the phrase because it conjures up the idea of fat state officials pigging out at the public trough and other evils connected with the example of German and other state capitalisms. But Lenin did not use the phrase as a slur or curse word, but as a scientific word to describe a feature of the economic relations that backward Russia was to have to pass through to get to socialism.

Lenin insisted on the distinction between state capitalism under bourgeois rule and state capitalism under workers' rule as a transitional step to socialism. (This is one of the issues muddied by the Swedes, for example, which they copied from Tony Cliff's *State Capitalism in Russia*.) Lenin pointed out that there is not a word in Marx or Engels about state capitalism under workers' rule, and he said this needed theoretical clarification. Unfortunately, Lenin himself did not go into this in depth. Some of Lenin's formulations seem ambiguous or even contradictory as to what he considered state capitalism and what socialism in the early Soviet republic. But what is clear from Lenin is that this was an issue demanding analysis.

To discuss these issues it is important to keep time and place in mind. Let's start with early NEP. At the beginning of NEP the state capitalist features of the soviet economy stand out pretty clearly: concessions or joint companies

with foreign and Russian investors; leasing mills and mines to former owners; state-regulated trade (mainly through non-worker coops). Then there are also the state enterprises, which were being reorganized on "corporate principles" and which Lenin also inferred contained state capitalist features. Keep in mind that when NEP was first launched the whole economy was in a coma. Almost all large enterprises were on the brink. State capitalism was more of a plan than a reality. As for socialism, one could speak of socialist economic relations mainly in the sense of the aspirations, the program of the ruling class and party. Then came the mid-20s. State enterprises were gaining ground over private or leased companies (foreign concessions never got off the ground anyhow). State-regulated trade had outstripped private trade; direct state organizations were replacing state-regulated coops. It was mainly in farming that private production was still predominant. This outcome was precisely what the party and the conscious workers had been straining for. The majority of the best party activists had been assigned to economic work so as to compete with and oust the private trader. The party, the organized workers, the soviet apparatus, had been locked in desperate struggle to see who would win. It was them (private commerce, industry) against us (the workers' state, the cause of socialism).

This "them versus us" equation seems to have influenced party theory. The prevailing view in party discussion was that the growing domination of the state sector meant the domination of socialist relations. It was considered to be the growing domination of socialism without qualifications (as we discussed at the Third Congress). In 1925-26 a few voices are heard from the opposition (Preobrazhensky, quietly Zinoviev) to the effect that there was still a question in this state sector of state capitalism. How the discussion went needs further looking into. But from what we have seen so far it is doubtful that such issues were raised forcefully or clearly. Among other things, the various "left" oppositionists did not agree on the point among themselves. Trotsky, for one, was big on the idea that state property meant socialized property and socialist relations (just as the modern Trotskyists blabber about defending "socialized property" in Eastern Europe, etc.)

In any case, there was little theoretical clarification of what were the concrete features of the soviet economy and state sector. Answers were served up in the black and white absolute terms that were becoming the fare of soviet thinking. It was declared by Stalin and the majority that when Lenin referred to state capitalism he only meant foreign concessions and leases. But the state sector was socialist and that was that. This became a cornerstone of Soviet orthodoxy from this time. To say otherwise was allegedly a slur on what had been achieved.

In fact, much had been achieved. The productive forces came out of their coma; state regulation gained ground over the private trader as the net of organization spread over the economy; and the way was paved for further advance. At the same time, there was still a long way to

go. What was needed was cool recognition that there was still commodity exchange and a money economy; still corporate principles of factory management; still an extensive system of bribes and money work incentives; still a largely small peasant economy. The situation was only beginning to pose the transition to socialist principles of organization and distribution. Yet the party leadership was blind to this and failed to coolly analyze precisely what had been achieved and what ground still had to be crossed.

What were the roots of this error? There had been repeated warnings (and disputes) in the party ranks that NEP (the freedom of trade, etc.) posed the danger of petty-bourgeois influences and deviations afflicting the party. Meanwhile, it looks like, the ideological influence of state capitalism crept in through the back door. The party apparatus was not itself wealthy and corrupt as it was to become in later years. Nonetheless, it was affected by its environment. Here was the majority of best party workers submerged in economic work, surrounded by the old managers, specialists and intellectuals, devoting themselves to the profitability of their departments and enterprises. All this within the life-and-death conflict between state control and regulation and the private trader. This may provide a partial theoretical explanation of how the party became one-sided about the socialist tasks it still faced.

The focus of attention became industrialization and bringing the peasants into large-scale economy. The tasks of socialism were reduced to these two points, as important as they were. Thus, many of the state capitalist features of the economy were carried into the first Five Year Plan and beyond. In some aspects they become even more pronounced (e.g. high pay for officials, wage differentials, etc.).

One thing we want to pursue in research is precisely how to characterize the Soviet economy in this transition period, and its evolution during these first 15 or 20 years. On the one hand, as long as the state was in the hands of the working class, it means a definite breach in capitalist relations. But beyond that, one has to study the forms of organization, management, planning, distribution, etc. This is needed for clarification of what is entailed in going from "state capitalism under the dictatorship of the proletariat" to socialism. It is needed also for understanding the trajectory of the soviet revolution, including at what point can one no longer speak of it being in transition towards socialism.

Questions of proletarian power

So much for the economic questions. At this point I would like to switch over from economics to politics. Study of Soviet history has posed a number of theoretical questions about the political regime of the transition to socialism, about the organization of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

So far, our discussion of the idea of "weak" socialism, or the period of transition to socialism, has focused on the economic. While there is not a direct, one-to-one corollary,

there is a political side to this. That is, the new working class power is also marked by the capitalist society from which it is born. It also is weakened, distorted, by the remnants of the old regime, by the economy, and limited to what the consciousness and organization of the working masses is able to achieve. The Russian example indicates that a whole period was needed to overcome these weaknesses and perfect the new working class rule that is not a state as such, i.e. that begins the withering away of the state.

The defects and weaknesses in the Soviet regime was Lenin's great preoccupation in the last couple years of his life. He returned to this theme repeatedly. The party as a whole registered the gravity of the problem:

The resolution of the Twelve Congress of the party held in April '23 reads as follows:

"Now that the Civil War is entirely over, the task of radical reconstruction and systematic improvement of the whole state apparatus can for the first time be placed on the party's agenda as a task of prime importance which will only be resolved in a number of years and only if the reorganization measures are undertaken extremely cautiously and are carefully thought through."

The resolution continues, and this is critical,

"The task of creating an inexpensive and truly new, truly socialist apparatus is the prime task of the years to come. Only its successful solution will ensure the unbreakable union of workers and peasants."

Unfortunately, such resolutions, and all Lenin's exhortations, only proved harder done than said. The Bolsheviks succeeded in removing some of the holdovers from the old regime, and setting up the new power throughout the territory. But they never accomplished the streamlined, cheap, government that drew in the masses and could be called truly socialist. In the main the state did not improve in this direction, and most of what can be learned from the Soviet experience is in the realm of failed attempts. There are also the Chinese and Albanian and other examples to look at. In the main, the theoretical and practical problems on this front of creating a "truly new, truly socialist apparatus" are yet to be solved.

This is a many-sided question. Let us go into three big ones posed by Soviet experience:

- (a) The smashing of the old state machine and the problem of the leftover bureaucracy;
- (b) The Commune or Soviet type of state and the problem of ensuring, maintaining its mass character; and
- (c) Working class democracy and the problem of bureaucratic repression.

These things are interrelated, but can be separated into these three parts.

Smashing the old state machine

One of the first principles of workers' revolution is that the exploited class cannot lay hold of the old state machine,

but must smash the state machine and replace it with their class dictatorship, which is not a state as such. Smashing the old state cannot be done by passing a law or issuing a decree. It comes about through revolution, which unleashes mass action and vast destructive energy against the old apparatus holding society down. This could be seen from the Paris Commune to the 1979 insurrection in Nicaragua. This breaking up is extremely liberating; it opens the path for huge social leaps.

In that sense, it accomplishes a miracle. In another sense it creates a knot of complex and painful problems for the revolutionary power. One side of the problem is the erection of the new (which we will get into in a minute). Another side is what approach to the inevitable remnants of the old state, which may be considerable? How deep should the attack on the old apparatus go? What precisely is to be smashed? The directly repressive side is one thing — dispersing the army, police, courts, etc. But what about the more administrative or economic functions? From the post office to the social security administration? These were among the problems faced by the Bolshevik revolution.

In *Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?* and other writings just prior to and after the October Revolution, Lenin indicated that the workers power can make use of much of these administrative or not directly repressive functions of the state, when broken from the top managers and capitalist control and surrounded by workers control.

Things didn't go quite as Lenin had discussed. With the workers coming to power, at first the bulk of the functionaries and office employees were horrified and bolted. The broom of the October Revolution went a long way towards smashing the old Tsarist and bourgeois apparatus. But it soon confronted crisis and civil war. The new regime simply didn't have enough people with training or expertise to hold on. A section of the old was brought back on board. This included military officers. It also included economic specialists, functionaries and employees who slid back into their offices in the ministries.

This compromise with the old bureaucracy was a major flaw, a weakness in the new regime, and it was considered so at the time. The *Program* of the party adopted in 1919 points to the "partial revival of bureaucratism within the Soviet system." Lenin and others spoke of the dictatorship of the proletariat with "a bureaucratic twist."

Frequently, the term "bureaucracy" has an airy, undefined quality. But here it was something quite tangible. There were several hundred thousand people, divorced from either the worker or peasant, imbued with bourgeois and capitalist (and even tsarist) methods of work. And these people surrounded the much smaller number of communist officials trying to steer the economy and state.

Overcoming this problem was not easy. The working masses had to gain literacy and skills to do this work. More than that, as indicated by the 12th Congress resolution, new methods, more streamlined, closer to the people, methods compatible with socialism, had to be created. It was this last part that became the big stumbling block.

By the mid-to-late '20s, the leadership was still pushing to raise workers to take up government work. In the main they eventually did accomplish a change of personnel. The old functionaries were eventually replaced by new people. But there was a marked one-sidedness to their approach to this problem. They more or less gave up the ghost as far as reforming, transforming the methods and nature of this machine. Despite the large number of communists and former workers brought on board, it only grew fatter, more detached and more arrogant, and the Party only became more submerged in its "culture".

Thus, when one speaks of "smashing the old state machine", it poses a series of problems. What is to be smashed? How far can the original onslaught go in this? What can be sustained? Then how to revamp this machinery, create something new, and not just stir the same old stew?

The commune or soviet-type state

When we speak of organizing the working class as the ruling class or the dictatorship of the proletariat — our general theoretical framework is the works of Marx, Engels and Lenin. Especially Marx and Engels on the Paris Commune and Lenin's *State and Revolution* and *Renegade Kautsky*. This framework is stated pretty well in the Bolshevik Program adopted at the Eighth Congress in 1919. The fundamentals of this theory is central to what communism is as opposed to either bourgeois reformism or anarchism.

The first condition is the smashing of the old state machine. On its ashes arises something new that is not the state in the same sense. It is the organization of the working class as the ruling class. It is a system of rule that is much closer, much less burdensome, and more responsive to masses, which is the first step on the road to doing away with the state altogether as classes are abolished.

Key features of this commune or soviet-type of state:

a. It rests on the mass energy, mobilization and organization of the workers. (Here it should be noted that Lenin and the party program of 1919 described the soviet power as an improvement from the commune, because it was based on work centers and therefore even more closely bound up with the workers.)

b. It brings the workers themselves into all spheres of governing and administration; and

c. It takes strong measures against the possibility of using positions for amassing wealth and privilege (right to recall; average workers' wages; abolition of distinction between legislative and executive functions — the full implications of the latter needs more looking into, but at least it means a barrier to having a professional caste of political windbags).

This is the general framework of the Marxist theory of workers' rule.

However, in the Soviet example, along with the held-over bureaucracy, there were a number of other obstacles that needed to be overcome to bring the working class

power within this framework, especially the problem of enlisting the masses as the new rulers of society.

In the days and months after the October uprising, one may find something closest to this framework. There were mass meetings everywhere, of soviets, of factory committees, bringing workers into politics and public affairs. The mass energy unleashed by the revolutionary events of 1917 was still high into the spring of 1918, as it spread from the big urban centers to the small towns and villages across the country.

Then came the civil war emergency. A highly centralized and iron rule was set up. But there was still a strong stamp of the working class and participation of the masses in the war. Whole factory committees and trade unions signed up en masse for the war effort. The workers were the backbone of the mainly peasant Red Army. The workers also organized the food and fuel detachments that kept the revolution from perishing of starvation and cold. These also helped the rural semi-proletarians organize their poor peasant committees and the grain requisitions. But all this came at a steep price, draining the cities of the best workers.

What came afterwards is more problematic. After the famine and political crisis of 1921, the huge job of running the country was left mainly to the party or its most organized part. In other words, a thin layer of the most conscious workers, centered in a few big cities, was trying to re-organize and steer a vast country of over 100 million people. Moreover, to administer, to make things work, they had to rely even more on the alliance between the party and the old bureaucracy.

Added to this was another factor, maybe even more critical in terms of general significance, and this was that the revolutionary energy among the masses had waned. They were exhausted from war and hunger. Some, such as sections of the poor and middle peasants, were to an extent satisfied with the new land redivision. The dying down of the revolutionary fires down below made everything difficult, including educational and cultural work, as far as broadening the foundation of the regime.

At this time, the formulation appeared in Lenin's and other Bolshevik writings that the working class power was being exercised through its vanguard. This became part of the general party language, such as at the 12th Congress in 1923 which states:

"The dictatorship of the working class cannot be assured in any other way than as the dictatorship of its progressive vanguard, i.e., the Communist Party." Later on, these formulations were hotly debated in terms of the principles of how the socialist regime should be organized.

But at first it seems to have been used as a description of what existed at the time. One way it would appear in Lenin's writings was when expressing concern that the work of governing could not be left to the party alone. Lenin's preoccupation was that the new power was precarious, unstable so long as it rested on this thin stratum; that everything must be done to bring the masses into the work

of administration; and that the main obstacle to this was the low educational and cultural level of the workers and poor peasants.

Speaking at the 8th Party Congress in March, 1919, Lenin discussed this problem in relation to the Soviets:

"... The result of this low cultural level," Lenin noted, "is that the Soviets, which by virtue of their program are organs of government *by the working people* are in fact organs of government *for the working people* by the advanced section of the proletariat, but not by the working people as a whole.

"Here," Lenin added, "we are confronted by a problem which cannot be solved except by prolonged education. At present this task is an inordinately difficult one for us, because, as I have had frequent occasion to say, the section of workers who are governing is inordinately, incredibly *small*. We must secure help." (*Collected Works*, vol. 29 page 183)

Lenin pounded on this theme for the next three years. Help, however, was slow in coming.

A series of attempts were made. There were non-party workers' conferences (which failed). There was a push to revitalize the trade unions and through them to bring the masses into economic and other administration (some things were accomplished here in the economic work, but strains between the unions and the masses persisted). There was also the Workers and Peasants Inspection, which Lenin at first had hoped would bring millions of working people into the work of control over the apparatus (but it never became a mass form, or an effective form).

An outstanding question anyone reading this material bumps into is "What happened to the soviets"? The term "soviet" was still everywhere as all government and administrative bodies were called "soviet". But the actual soviet movement, the workers councils, the all-embracing organization of the workers and exploited, lapsed. Our investigation of the soviets is far from complete, including what they were in 1917 and 1918 before the civil war. But all accounts indicate that towards the end of the war, they were suffering. (This is confirmed by passages from Lenin such as the one already mentioned.) The soviets were no longer the vibrant centers of workers' political life that they appear to have once been. Originally, the concept of soviet government meant that all power or authority rested in the councils of workers in the factories, the councils of soldiers in the regiments, and so forth. But now the factories were all but closed and the regiments disbanded. The councils were a shell of their former selves, even as industry began to revive during NEP. During NEP, rural soviets were even less, with rural authority reverting to the old village mir.

The Paris Commune gave the first example of the all-embracing organization through which the workers were to exert their rule. The October Revolution gave the example of the soviets, workers' assemblies based in the big work centers, as the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Immense stress was placed on this point for Russia and the world. The soviet path was declared from

the rostrum of the Communist International and every other communist platform as the form for the exploited classes to become the masters of the world. But within a few years of the transfer of power to the soviets, this form was in the intensive care unit, and never got back on its feet. What's more, the revolution never found some other form to take its place.

This poses a series of questions about how to create a situation where the class as a class exerts its will. It would be utopian to believe that the level of mass participation can be called up by any government decree or that the soviets would have revived if only someone had given the slogan to do so (indeed, the slogan was raised over and over). This is because conditions can be more or less favorable and there always will be ebbs and flows of mass energy. What is clear from this example, however, is that the initial wave is just the beginning, and that a great deal of work is needed to find ways to step by step bring the masses into politics, public affairs and broaden the foundation of workers' rule. The communist party, the class conscious minority, plays a critical part. And one of the decisive things for this minority is to ensure the link with the majority, to ensure the majority doesn't become passive observers, to ensure its active participation. Otherwise the regime will be unstable, cannot be durable, or can lose its class character and evolve into the rule of new exploiters divorced from the masses.

Lenin was acutely aware of the dangers involved in having to rely on such a thin layer of people for the actual work of administration and governing the country. It seems that for a short period the party attempted to confront this problem. However, at a certain point, by 1925 and on, it started to become self-confident and complacent on the issue.

Take, for example, Stalin's *Concerning questions of Leninism*. Here he rebuked Zinoviev for using the phrase "dictatorship of the party." He described a full-blown system of proletarian rule, rooted in soviets, trade unions, and so forth, with the party as the vanguard. I have some concerns that some of the features Stalin portrays as general principles of a socialist regime, in fact correlated to certain conditions particular to the Russian struggle at the time, and therefore should not be swallowed as universally valid. But the main thing is that Stalin painted a false picture of what actually existed in Russia at the time. It is striking that any sense of concern that the work of governing rested on a thin layer (principally the party) was lost. Instead he portrayed a system that did not exist. And this type of official cover-up became the orthodoxy under which the party, state and economic administration grew more and more separated from the class and evolved into a new ruling elite.

Workers' democracy

For lack of a better word, a series of democratic questions come up. Questions having to do with freedom

of expression, assembly, organization. These are difficult problems. There are no pre-cut patterns in Marx, Engels and Lenin on this, but a general outlook.

This cannot be looked at from the angle of pure democracy, but from the angle of the class struggle and the struggle to abolish exploitation. Without suppression of the capitalists and their attempts to regain power, the workers' cause would be doomed from start.

In the days of the Russian revolution, the White Guards were trying to settle accounts with the workers movement with machine guns; the work force of whole factories would be lined up against the wall in collective punishment. Without the fiercest suppression of the landlords and capitalists it was absurd to talk about freedom for the workers. There was also the necessity of establishing discipline and order in the ranks of the workers and peasants. To create this required strong class consciousness combined with a strong central authority. There were many things said and done in the Russian example that were extreme, brutal, etc., but none of this can be appraised outside of the context of the extremely brutal and desperate struggle that was taking place between the contending classes. This is one side of the thing.

The other side is that the workers need democratic freedoms for their own development. Democracy for the workers is not just a humanitarian nicety. There has to be room for the workers to develop politically, for carrying through the ideological struggle, for a real political life among the masses. In a large and complex society emerging from capitalism, among the working masses themselves there will be different interests, moods, opinions about how to create the new society. If there is not room for the workers to take part in this, the workers cannot make the creation of this new society their own, making education, training, mobilization that much harder. There is also the question of carrying through the fight of political trends to inoculate the workers from bourgeois and petty-bourgeois tendencies.

It is not a sign of strength, but of weakness when the revolution is forced to rely on heavy-handed bureaucratic control of ideological and political life, or when bourgeois or petty-bourgeois expressions are simply driven underground. This puts a wet blanket on the political life of the masses. It distorts the nature of the regime by over inflating its repressive and police function. Instead of settling accounts with non-proletarian trends, bans—and police and bureaucratic measures—tend to drive things into dark corners to fester.

In the Soviet revolution the ideas and practices on this front evolved during the different phases of the struggle. In the first months after October, the situation was quite open. There were still opposition groups and a number of anti-government Socialist-Revolutionary (SR) and Menshevik newspapers. (Even when these papers were fomenting rebellion, how to handle them was not a foregone conclusion. The first proposals to close them down were hotly disputed within the Bolshevik leadership.)

Then came the civil war. The SRs, Mensheviks, the whole petty-bourgeois democratic trend, rallied to the side of the capitalists and landlords, or at least become their tools. Fearsome decrees were adopted to crush these groupings. To a large extent this was more of a threat than a reality. In practice, a variety of both fierce and conciliatory tactics were used to disintegrate, to win over the base of the Mensheviks and SRs. As well, the ability to clamp down on these groupings only went as far as the soviet regime could reach, and there were gaping holes in the countryside and elsewhere. In any case, the civil war required suppressing the coalition of parties that were directly trying to strangle workers' rule.

Pursuing the war also meant iron and top-down methods among the red forces and the workers' ranks. Things were to be accomplished by decree from the center, and the appointment of personnel to make sure they were carried out. There was no room for vacillations. Often there was no leeway for democratic niceties and to talk things out in dealings with the trade unions, the soviets and the moods, inclinations, among the masses. (While not passing judgment on every decree and measure taken, it can be said with relative confidence that if Lenin and the bolsheviks had not adopted ferocious, centralized and iron methods, the workers' revolution in Russia would have been snuffed out as it was in Hungary and other places where the workers' party adopted a "milder" policy.)

As the war wound down, a broad discontent swelled up from below with the top-down system. Adjustments were made at the 10th Party Congress in March, 1921. Especially in regard to the trade unions, more room was to be given for the workers to elect their union leaders in place of appointment from the party or government center. Other measures were also taken to normalize things.

But as the NEP unfolded, much of the emergency and top-down methods remained. The resolutions for a more democratic relationship with the trade unions did not mean much in practice. The top continued to try to exert a tight control on all aspects of political and ideological life among the masses. As the regime gained a certain stability, instead of opening up, in many ways it tightened down more firmly. Its hand kept reaching as far as it was strong enough to reach. Meanwhile, the regime became strong enough to make the suppression of opposition parties and groups a reality.

The Bolshevik leaders rejected the idea of a "political NEP". Freedom to sell grain was one thing; but there would be no corresponding political opening up. But in fact Lenin's views on such things as the need to normalize the situation with the trade unions indicated a certain recognition of the need to change the methods of governing. It seems that the changes that were made were not enough, or were even reversed, and that more profound changes were needed to open up the political and ideological life of the masses. How to do this may have required a whole period of testing and experimentation.

It appears that the Bolshevik leaders never felt the

confidence to carry through on this. They were squeezed by economic calamities, political strains in their own ranks and among the masses, and by the world pressures of imperialism.

Instead, from the mid-20s on, they relied more and more heavily on methods of repression, bureaucratic control, power of appointment, etc. This became a weight on the revolution earlier than we had first considered. As the apparatus of control and repression grew, it grew more stifling, more arrogant and divorced from the masses. One by-product of the crash industrialization drive, and especially the collectivization drive, was an intensification of this in the early 30s, and then again in the mid-late 30s when the party and apparatus started to eat itself up. By the early 30s, the outlines of the full-blown system of censorship, travel control, snooping on citizens, etc., etc., begins to take shape. But momentum in this direction began a number of years before.

The evolution of the Soviet power, from the October Revolution through to the consolidation of the revisionist tutelage one and a half or two decades later, poses a series of problems. More thought and more investigation is needed into a number of complex and interrelated questions.

What can and what cannot be accomplished in the fields of politics and ideology by government measures as opposed to education, persuasion, etc. (and the later not meant in the bureaucratic sense — not in the sense of a decree mandating the teaching of dialectical materialism in the same dusty fashion as the Catholics teach catechism)? What methods does the communist party use to ensure its vanguard position? What prerogatives does it claim in relation to the state and the organizations of the masses (not so much theoretically, or formally, but what practice will actually strengthen communism in the long run)? What means to ensure the political and ideological life among the masses? What means to ensure an outlet for expression of thinking among the mass of workers? What attitude towards other parties, trends? Are there conditions when leaving certain room for those who are not in open revolt would be favorable? And so forth.

In general, revisionist doctrine distorts the theory of the socialist state in the direction of bourgeois democracy. But there is also the stifling bureaucratic side to the revisionist model. It seems that a number of pieces of this model come from what became the soviet practice and ideological orthodoxy from the mid-20s on. More work is needed to separate the wheat from the chaff of this period. Some of the things that were done in the Soviet Union may or may not have been necessary and correct at the time; some should have only been seen as temporary and not principles or a lasting model of working class rule.

There are series of other theoretical questions relating to the socialist state. But these three discussed above (smashing the old state, creating/perfecting the new commune/soviet type of rule, workers' democracy) are the main ones that the study is coming up against so far.

Examining these things cuts through utopian ideas of what the new state will be like. It brings it down to earth. Just as concrete economic steps need to be taken for the transition to socialism — concrete political steps are needed to form, recast, create a state suitable for socialism. This study is helpful in terms of making this more concrete, more related to real life.

Inner-party life and the question of factionalism

Another thing that you can't help smacking into when reading through this historical material is that the quality, vigor, of thinking inside the party declines after Lenin is out of the picture. It is less creative, less dynamic, less connected to real life issues, and more woody and doctrinaire. It is not right to attribute this simply to the loss of Lenin. His genius was a product of the revolutionary movement, not the other way around. The wane of thinking in the party is inseparable from the objective crisis and retreat of the revolutionary movement. At the same time, one has to look into the practices and models of party-building that crystallized in this epoch which are linked to the bureaucratization of the party and the ossification of its ideological life.

There was a noticeable evolution in the years 1923, 1924, 1925, 1926. There were a number of contradictory things in terms of party life. On one hand, this was a time when the political energy among the workers remained low. Yet the party started to grow rapidly with generally new workers with relatively little political training. It was a time before the party officialdom started to pig out on privileges and bonuses. Yet this is when the party starts to set up icons, and a spirit of infallibility and arrogance creeps in. It was a time when there were still some big ideological clashes. Yet the quality of discussion on all sides is sliding into quote mongering, false dichotomies, and generally scoring points on the opponent rather than clarifying issues.

The backdrop to this was the high level of tension inside party. Any sign of discord was looked at with dread, as a dangerous sign of an imminent split and the collapse of the soviet government. In this atmosphere, the mark of party unity, party cohesion, more and more became loyalty to every phrase most recently uttered by the leadership or to every comma snatched from a quote from Lenin.

An elaborate top-down system was brought into play to enforce this loyalty. An important part of this was what was called the appointment system. Under this system, the secretariat in Moscow had wide authority of transfers and appointments. The local secretary was frequently selected from above, and these secretaries enjoyed wide powers. This system had its history in the days of the underground and in the mass mobilizations of the civil war. But after the war, and after the post-war crisis, it was used more and more widely as a method of individual screening based on ideological criteria, that is, how closely someone followed the current word. Loyalty could mean appointment as secretary of the committee. Disagreement could mean work

in an obscure office, or in Siberia or in a foreign embassy. The appointment system and the extraordinary powers of the secretariat and the secretaries also had their impact on the selection of delegates to congresses and conferences.

Step by step a system was built that squelched public discussion of controversial issues. This was not a straight-line process. Various attempts were made to make room for airing disagreement. For example, there were the short-lived debating clubs. In 1925-26, after the first clash with the "left" opposition of Zinoviev and Kamenev, policy disagreements were generally kept out of the press (and thus started to take the form of hints and code words that were useless for the political enlightenment of the masses). The lid was step by step tightened down on the internal party discussion as well.

In the main, this was done in the name of guarding party unity and combating factionalism. There was considerable inner-party strife during these years (speaking here of the 1923-1927 period). Some of this involved divisive, groupist or factional methods. However, it seems that what was considered factional and thus proscribed covered a lot of terrain, to the point that disagreement became increasingly synonymous with "opposition" and "opposition" with illegal factionalism.

This did not resolve the problem of inner-party strife. It simply meant that the dominant faction (if it can be called that) or the dominant grouping had its say and put the muzzle on those who disagree.

The way the fight against factionalism, or alleged factionalism, was conducted raises questions about the role of the original ban on factions adopted at the Tenth Congress of the party in 1921. Was this ban in line with Bolshevik tradition, or was this something new? Did Lenin intend this as a principle of party building, or only as a temporary means in a particular crisis? What impact did this ban actually have on the inner-party life? Were the stifling practices that became marked by 1923 on a by-product of an ill-conceived Tenth Congress resolution, or were they a misinterpretation or misuse of the Tenth

Congress resolution? What was originally meant by faction and factionalism, and what did it mean later on?

In general, the shutting down of party life was inseparable from the economic and political features discussed above. By the late 20s and early 30s all these features were coming together into the stifling revisionist system that has been passed down to the present.

Other issues

These are the issues we wanted to present to the conference. However, there are a number of other questions that we have come up against and want to study. This is just a listing of some of these things which gives an idea of the scope of the investigation.

— Assessment of the first five year plan and the industrialization drive.

— Assessment of the mass collectivization drive. What economic results? What political and social results?

— Assessment of the different debates and inner-party conflicts, including the "workers opposition", the Trotsky and "left oppositions", and the various views on the path to socialism in Russia. This includes looking into some of the hotly debated issues such as the theory of socialism in one country and permanent revolution.

— There are also some international events that were hotly debated in the party in the 20s. This includes the German uprising of 1923, the Anglo-Russian Unity Committee and the British general strike of 1926, and the Chinese revolution and the KMT coup against the communists in 1927. These are not directly a question of development of the soviet revolution, but they say something about the thinking among the ranks of the Bolshevik leaders.

The study has been slow. This is a vast subject. If there has been headway, it has been in that we have collected and examined lots of material, extracted a lot of notes, and pushed forward the thinking process about where this study is going. And as the Third Congress did, hopefully this conference will give this a further boost. □

How Weld robs the poor in Massachusetts

From the July 17 issue of Boston Worker:

[Republican Governor] Weld and the [Democrats in the] legislature have spent the first six months of this year freezing wages and laying off state and local workers, cutting benefits for the poor and denying benefits to the hundreds of thousands of long-term unemployed who are running out of unemployment insurance. But the final budget passed was not enough for Weld. He wants to make even further cuts on the state workers and the poor. One of his plans is to force state workers to pay another 20 dollars a week for health insurance. This will save the state 45 to 50 million dollars a year.

Interestingly enough this 50 million dollars a year is just enough to pay for the business Research and Development tax credit just passed by the legislature. Weld-onomics: simply take from the workers and give to the rich. And more is planned. Economists are predicting that the state will have a 600 million dollar surplus next year, now that the workers and poor have been put on rations. So Weld is hurrying to get legislation passed that will give even more tax breaks to the rich.

The rich love Weld and the pro-business Democrats who run the legislature. They are helping lower the standard of living of the working class so that the rich can make more profits. □