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Revolutionary organizing

1983: Vanguard Parties

- Features - Ernest Mandel Archive -

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VI Lenin

To approach the problem of parties, party-building, and the necessity of the revolutionary vanguard party, is to point to the peculiarities of a socialist revolution (or if you do not like the word "revolution," a socialist transformation of bourgeois society).

The socialist revolution is going to be the first revolution in the history of mankind which tries to reshape society in a conscious way according to a plan. It does not go into all the details, of course, which depend on concrete conditions and on the changing material infrastructure of society. But at the very least it is based on a plan of what a classless society has to be and how you can get there. It is also the first revolution in history which needs a high level of activity and of self-organization of the whole toiling population, that is to say, the overwhelming majority of men and women in society. It is from these two key features of a socialist revolution that you can immediately draw a series of conclusions.

You cannot have a spontaneous socialist revolution. You cannot make a socialist revolution without really trying. And you cannot have a socialist revolution commandeered from the top, ordered around by some omniscient leader or group of leaders. You need both ingredients in a socialist revolution: the highest level of consciousness possible, and the highest level of self-organization and self-activity by the broadest possible segment of the population. All the problems of the relations between a vanguard organization and the masses stem from that basic contradiction.

If we look at the real world, the real development in bourgeois society for the last hundred and fifty years (more or less since the origin of the modern labor movement), we again see this striking contradiction. It helps us overcome one of the main disputes about the working class and the labor movement which has been going on a long time, and which is right in the middle of the political debate today. Is the working class an instrument for revolutionary social change? Is the working class integrated in bourgeois society? What has been its real role for the last hundred and fifty years? What does the historical balance sheet tell us about these questions?

The only conclusion you can draw from the real historical movement is that by and large, in day-to-day life, what Lenin called trade union consciousness dominates the working class. I would call it elementary class consciousness of the working class. This does not lead to permanent, day-to-day revolt against capitalism, but it is absolutely essential and necessary, as Marx pointed out many times, for an anticapitalist workers' revolt to occur sometime. If the workers do not fight for higher wages, if they do not fight for a shorter workday, if they do not fight for, let us say it in a provocative way, day-to-day economic issues, they become demoralized slaves. With demoralized slaves you are never going to make a socialist revolution, or even to acquire elementary class solidarity. So they have to fight for their immediate demands. But the fight for these immediate demands does not lead them automatically and spontaneously to challenge the existence of bourgeois society.

The other side of the story is also true. Periodically, the workers do revolt against bourgeois society, not by a hundred, five hundred, or a thousand, but by the millions. After all, the history of the 20th century is the history of

social revolutions. Anybody who denies that should read the history books again, not to mention the newspapers. There has been hardly a single year since 1917, and in a certain sense since 1905, without a revolution somewhere in the world in which the workers participated in a rather important way. It is true that they did not always constitute the majority of the revolution's combatants.

But that is going to change because the working class has become a majority in society in practically all the important countries of the world. So periodically, the workers do revolt against bourgeois society, as the statistics of the last twenty years in Europe attest. There was a real workers' challenge against the basic setup of capitalism in 1960-61 in Belgium, in 1968 in France, in 1968-69 in Italy, in 1974-75 in Portugal, partially in Spain in 1975-76. And what was going on in Poland in 1980-81, if not a challenge against capitalism, was certainly a challenge for socialism. So this is a completely different picture from a permanently passive, integrated, bourgeoisified working class. More than 45 million workers have actively participated in these struggles.

The conclusion you can draw from these characteristics is that you have an uneven development of class activity and an uneven development of class consciousness in the working class. Workers do not strike every day, they cannot do that the way they function in the capitalist economy. The way they have to live by selling their labor power makes that impossible. They would starve if they would strike every day. And they certainly cannot make revolution every day, every year, or even every five years, for economic, social, cultural, political, and psychological reasons which I have no time to spell out. So you have a cyclical development of class militancy and class activity which is partially determined by an inner logic. If you fight for many years and the fight ends with grave defeats, then you will not start fighting at the same level or a higher level the year after the defeat. It will take you some time to recuperate; it might be ten years, fifteen years, or even twenty years.

The opposite is also true. If you fight during some years with successes, even medium successes, you get momentum to fight on a broader and broader scale and on a higher and higher level. So we have this cyclical movement in the history of the international class struggle which we could describe in detail. Very closely combined with that uneven development of class militancy is an uneven development of class consciousness, not necessarily a mechanical function of the first. You can have high levels of class activity with a relatively low level of class consciousness. And the opposite is also true. You can have relatively high levels of class consciousness with a lower level of class militancy than one would have expected. I am talking, of course, about class consciousness of broad masses, of millions of people, not class consciousness of small vanguard layers.

Coming out of all these basic conceptual distinctions we can conclude the necessity of a vanguard formation nearly immediately. You need a vanguard organization in order to overcome the dangerous potential brought about by the uneven development of class militancy and class consciousness.

If the workers would be at the highest point of militancy and consciousness all the time, you would not need a vanguard organization. But, unfortunately, they are not and cannot be there under capitalism. So you need a group of people who embody a permanently high level of militancy and activity, and a permanently high level of class consciousness. After each wave of rising class struggle and rising class consciousness, when a turning point arrives and the actual activity of the masses declines, consciousness falls to a lower level and activity falls to nearly zero. The first function of a revolutionary vanguard organization is to maintain the continuity of the theoretical, programmatic, political, and organizational acquisitions of the previous phase of high class activity, and of high working class consciousness. It serves as the permanent memory of the class and of the labor movement, memory which is codified, one way or another, in a program in which you can educate the new generation which then does not need to start from scratch in its concrete way of intervention in the class struggle.

This first function, then, is to assure a continuity of lessons drawn from the accumulated historical experience, because that is what a socialist program is: the sum total of the lessons drawn from all the experiences of real class

struggles, real revolutions, and real counterrevolutions in the last hundred and fifty years. Very few people can cope with that and nobody, absolutely nobody, can cope with that alone. You need an organization, and given the world nature of this experience, you need both a national and a worldwide organization to be able to constantly assess that sum total of historical and current experience of class struggle and revolution, to enrich it by new lessons coming out of new revolutions, to make it more and more adequate to the needs of class struggles and revolutions going on right at this time.

There is a second dimension. It is the organizational dimension, which is really not solely organizational, but is, in reality, also political. Here we come to that famous question of centralization. Revolutionary Marxists stand for democratic centralism. But the word centralization is not to be taken in the first place as an organizational dimension, and in no way whatsoever is it essentially an administrative one. It is political. What does "centralization" mean? It means centralization of experience, centralization of knowledge, centralization of conclusions drawn out of actual militancy.

Here, again, we see a tremendous danger for the working class and the labor movement if there is no such centralization of experience: this is the danger of sectorialization and fragmentation, which does not enable anyone to draw adequate conclusions for action.

If we have women militants engaged only in feminist struggles, if we have youth militants engaged only in youth struggles, if we have students engaged only in student struggles, if we have immigrant workers engaged only in immigrant worker struggles, if we have oppressed nationalities engaged only in oppressed nationalities' struggles, if we have unemployed engaged only in unemployed struggles, if we have trade unionists engaged only in trade union struggles, if we have unorganized, un-unionized, essentially unskilled workers engaged only in their own struggles, if we have political militants engaged only in election campaigns or in the publication of newspapers, and if each of them operates separately from each other, they operate only on the basis of limited and fragmented experience and they cannot (for basic, I would say, epistemological reasons) draw correct conclusions from their own experience. They have fragmented struggles, fragmented experience, fragmented partial consciousness. They only see part of the whole picture. The conclusions which they come up with will be, you can say a priori, at least partially wrong. They cannot have an overall, total correct view of reality because they see only a fragmented part of that reality.

The same thing is true, of course, from an international point of view. If you concentrate only on Eastern Europe, you have a partial view of world reality. If you concentrate only on the underdeveloped, semicolonial, dependent countries, you have a partial view of world reality, If you concentrate only on the imperialist countries, you have a partial view of world reality. Only if you bring together the experience of the concrete struggles conducted by the real masses in the three sectors of the world (which are also called the three sectors of world revolution), then you have an overall, correct view of world reality. That is the big advantage of the Fourth International, because it is an international organization, which has comrades actually fighting, not only theoretically analyzing, in all these three sectors of the world, and it is concretely related to the struggles in all these three sectors of world revolution. This superiority is not due to the great intelligence of leaders of the Fourth International. It is just due to that elementary centralization of concrete experience of struggles on a global scale, added to a correct historical program.

That is what centralization is all about. It means that, I would not say the best because that is exaggerated, but at least good fighters in the unions, good fighters among unskilled workers and the unemployed, good fighters among oppressed nationalities, good fighters among women, youth, and students, good anti-imperialist fighters, good fighters in all these sectors of actually militant, oppressed, and exploited people in each state and on a world scale, come together to centralize their experiences in order to compare the lessons of their struggles on a statewide and worldwide scale, draw relevant conclusions, examine and reexamine in a critical way at each stage their program and their political line, in the light of the lessons to be drawn out of all these experiences, in order to have an overall view of society, of the world, of its dynamics, and of our common socialist goal and how to get there. That is what we call, in our jargon, a correct program, a correct strategy, and correct tactics. Given the uneven development of class

consciousness, and the uneven and discontinuous level of class activity, this cannot be done by the masses in their totality. To believe otherwise is just a utopian and spontaneist daydream.

This can only be done by those people who claim for themselves the terribly "elitist" merit of being active in a more permanent way, in a more continuous way, than others. That is the only quality they claim for themselves, but it is a quality which is proven in life. And all those who do not have that quality also prove it in practice by ceasing political activity. All those who do have that quality, however, continue to fight even when the masses periodically stop fighting, do not stop developing class consciousness when the masses do (anybody who challenges this right challenges an elementary democratic and human right), continue to elaborate politics and theory, and constantly attempt to intervene in society in a permanent and continuous way. Out of that "merit," however modest and limited it is, grow a series of concrete and practical qualities which then constitute the basis for the justification of a vanguard organization.

As I said before, there is a real contradiction in the relationship between a vanguard organization and the broader masses. There is a real dialectical tension, if we can call it that, and we have to address ourselves to that tension. First of all, I used the words "vanguard organizations"; I did not use the words "vanguard parties." This is a conceptual difference I introduce on purpose. I do not believe in self-proclaimed parties. I do not believe in fifty people or a hundred people standing in Market Square beating their breasts and saying, "We are the vanguard party." Perhaps they are in their own consciousness, but if the rest of society does not give a damn about them, they will be shouting in that marketplace for a long time without this having any result in practical life, or worse, they will try to impose their convictions on an unreceptive mass through violence. A vanguard organization is something which is permanent. A vanguard party has to be constructed, has to be built through a long process. One of the characteristics of its existence is that it becomes recognized as such by at least a substantial minority of the class itself. You cannot have a vanguard party which has no following in the class.

A vanguard organization becomes a vanguard party when a significant minority of the real class, of the really existing workers, poor peasants, revolutionary youth, revolutionary women, revolutionary oppressed nationalities, recognizes it as their vanguard party, i.e., follows it in action. Whether that must be ten percent or fifteen percent, that does not matter, but it must be a real sector of the class. If it does not exist, then you have no real party, you have only the nucleus of a future party. What will happen to that nucleus will be shown by history. It remains an open question, not yet solved by history. You need a permanent struggle to transform that vanguard organization into a real revolutionary vanguard party rooted in the class, present in the working class struggle, and accepted by at least a real fraction of the real class as such.

Here we have to bring in another concept. I said before that the class is not permanently active and permanently on a high level of class consciousness. Now I have to introduce a distinction. The mass of the class is not, but the class is not homogeneous, not only because there are individuals who are members of different political groupings, at different levels of political awareness, under different influences of bourgeois ideology, but also because it has a differentiation going on within its own massive framework. There is a process of social and of political differentiation going on in the real working class all the time. There is a mass-vanguard distillation going on in the working class during certain periods. Lenin wrote a lot about it; Trotsky wrote a lot about it; Rosa Luxemburg, surprised as some of you may be, wrote a lot about it. People who have the ambition of being active in building revolutionary organizations, as I am, can give you the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of these vanguard workers in their own countries. It is not a mysterious question. It is a practical problem. Who are these vanguard workers in Belgium, France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, West Germany? They are those who are leading real strikes, who are organizing trade union militant oppositions, who are preparing mass demonstrations and mass struggles, who are differentiating themselves from the traditional bureaucratic apparatus.

It is both a social differentiation and a political differentiation, although one can discuss the exact weight of each element, which is not identical in each situation. But the layers as such are very real. The dimension of the layers are

different in different periods. The "Revolutionary Obleute," as they are called in Germany, of the trade unions and the big factories of Berlin who were leading the November 1918 revolution and building the Independent Socialist Party, who afterwards moved to the Communist Party when the left wing of the Independent Socialist Party fused with the Communist Party at the Congress of Halle, were a very concrete layer in German society, not only in Berlin, but also in many of the industrial areas of the country. Everybody knew them, they were not an unknown quantity. They were tens and tens of thousands of people. If you look at the vanguard of the German working class fifteen years later, say around 1930-33, this layer had strongly decreased in number, but it was still there.

If you study Russia, you see the same thing. In 1905, everybody knew these people. They were those who were leading the strikes, the real mass struggles at rank-and-file levels against the czar. They were, in their majority, outside of Social Democracy before 1905, tended to come to Social Democracy during the 1905-06 revolution, and again partially left the party (Mensheviks as well as Bolsheviks) in the period of reaction. They reentered politics and grew on a massive scale in 1912 and especially with the beginning of the February 1917 revolution, and then, the majority of them were absorbed by the Bolshevik Party after April 1917, after the Bolshevik Party took a straight and clear line for "All Power to the Soviets," that is to say, for the dictatorship of the proletariat.

One can discuss whether the Bolsheviks became a vanguard party in the true sense of the word in 1912-13, or only in 1917. I would tend to say that they became that in 1912-13; otherwise it would have been very difficult for them to grow as quickly as they did in the spring of 1917. But that is just a point of historical analysis. The real notion is that of the fusion in real life between this vanguard layer of the working class, the real leaders of real struggles of workers at factory and neighborhood levels, of woman's struggles, of youth struggles, of national minority struggles, and the political vanguard organization. When that fusion has taken place, at least in part, you have a real vanguard party, recognized as such by a significant minority of the class. It will then become a majority probably only during the revolutionary crisis itself, on the condition of following a correct political line. If you do not have that fusion, you have only the nucleus of a future vanguard party, you have a vanguard organization, which is a precondition for that fusion at a later stage.

This becomes a third dimension: the self-organization of the class. Self-organization of the class goes through different forms at different stages of the class struggle. The most elementary self-organizations are trade unions. Then you have mass political parties at different levels of consciousness, bourgeois labor parties, independent labor parties, and revolutionary workers' parties. Only under conditions of revolutionary crises do you have the highest level of self-organization; this is the Soviet type of organization, which is to say, workers' councils, people's councils, call them what you want, popular committees.

Why do I say highest? Because they engulf the great majority of the workers which generally, under non-revolutionary conditions, you find neither in trade unions nor in political parties.

Direct self-organization through a workers' council type of self-organization of the class is the highest form, not because I have a theoretical or ideological or moral or sentimental predilection for them-which of course I have-but for the simple, objective reason: they organize a much higher percentage of the workers and the exploited masses. Under normal conditions, unrestricted by bureaucratic apparatuses and leadership, they should organize up to 90 to 95 percent of the exploited masses, which you never find in trade unions or political parties. So they are the highest forms of self-organization.

Furthermore, there is absolutely no contradiction between the separate organizations of revolutionary vanguard militants and their participation in the mass organizations of the working class. On the contrary, history generally confirms that the more conscious and the better you are organized in vanguard organizations, the more constructively you operate in the mass organizations of the working class. This means that you have to avoid the theoretical underpinnings of sectarianism, that you have to respect workers' democracy, socialist democracy, soviet

or workers' councils' or popular councils' democracy, in a very thorough way. But this being said, there is no contradiction whatsoever.

Again, the only right you claim for yourself inside the unions, inside the mass parties, inside the soviets, is to be a more devoted, a more energetic, a more dedicated, a more courageous, a more lucid, a more self-denying builder of the unions, builder of the mass parties, builder of the soviets, defender of the general interests of the working class, without attributing to yourself any special privilege towards your fellow workers, except the right to try to convince them.

Our stance for working class democracy, for socialist democracy, for socialist pluralism, is based on a programmatic understanding that there are no contradictions between the interests of communists, vanguard militants, the working class, and the labor movement in its totality. There are no conditions in which we subordinate the interests of the class as a whole to the interests of any sect, any chapel, any separate organization. It is out of a theoretical understanding of that truth that we can fight enthusiastically, that we can fight with devotion and with deep understanding for the workers' united front, for a policy of unification of all different tendencies of the labor movement and the working class for common goals, because we believe that the victory of socialism is impossible without the victory of the fight for these common goals.

There is also a basic theoretical underpinning of this stance. We do not believe that Marxism is a full, final doctrine, dogma, or Weltanschauung. We do not believe that the Marxist program, which embodies the continuity of the experience of the actual class struggle and real revolutions of the last one hundred and fifty years, is a definitely closed book. If you would believe that, then the best revolutionary Marxist would be a parrot who would just read by memory, or expect the answer having fed all the lessons into a computer. For us, Marxism is always open because there are always new experiences, there are always new facts, including facts about the past, which have to be incorporated in the corpus of scientific socialism. Marxism is always open, always critical, always self-critical.

It is not by accident that when Marx was called to answer the question in the drawing room game "What is your main life dictum?" he gave as the answer, "De omnibus est dubitandum" ("You have to doubt everything"). This is really the opposite attitude of the one which is so often stupidly and foolishly attributed to Marx, that he was building a new religion without God. The spirit to doubt everything and to put into question everything that you yourself have said is the very opposite of religion and of dogma. Marxists believe that there are no eternal truths, and no people who know everything. The second stanza of our common anthem, The Internationale, starts with the wonderful words, in French:

Il n'y a pas de sauveur suprême
Ni Dieu, ni César, ni tribun,
Producteur sauvons - nous nous mÃªmes
Décrétons le salut commun.

In German it is even clearer:

Es rettet uns Kein hoh'ires Wesen,
Kein Gott, Kein Kaiser, Kein Tribun
Uns aus dem Elend zu erlosen,
Konnen wir nur selber tun.

Only the whole mass of the producers can emancipate themselves. There is no God, no Caesar, no unfailing Central Committee, no unfailing Chairman, no unfailing General Secretary or First Secretary who can substitute for the

collective efforts of the class. That is why we try simultaneously to build vanguard organizations and mass organizations.

You cannot trick the working class or "lead" the working class to do something which it does not want to do. You have to convince the working class. You have to help the working class understand collectively and massively the need for a socialist transformation of society, for the socialist revolution. That is the dialectical relationship between the vanguard party and the mass self-organization of the working class.

And that is why, for us, socialist pluralism, the debate, even when it takes an unhealthy and unhappy form of factionalism and bickering which gets on the nerves of all serious militants (I completely sympathize with them, because it is largely a waste of time), is an unavoidable price to be paid for keeping up that self-critical process. If nobody is, in advance, in possession of the whole truth and nothing but the truth, if each situation has always to be reexamined in a critical way against new experiences of working class struggle and of real revolutions, then of course you need criticism, you need the confrontation of different proposed solutions, you need variants. It is not a luxury just in order to be truthful to an abstract formula of workers' democracy. NO! It is an absolutely essential precondition for making a victorious revolution which will lead to a classless society.

Revolution is not a goal in itself. Revolution is an instrument, like a party is an instrument. The goal is building a socialist classless society. Everything we do, even today, even with shorter term perspectives like leading the masses in their day-to-day struggles, can never be done in such a way that it conflicts basically with the longer term goal which is the goal of self-emancipation of the working class, and self-emancipation of all the exploited, by building a classless society without exploitation, without oppression, without violence of men and women against each other. Socialist democracy is not a luxury but an absolute, essential necessity for overthrowing capitalism and building socialism. Let me give two examples.

We understand today the functional aspect of socialist democracy in post-capitalist society (the societies of Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, China, Vietnam, and Cuba). Without socialist pluralistic democracy you cannot find correct solutions for the basic problems of socialist planning. No party can substitute for the mass of the people to determine what the mass of the people want as priorities in the form of consumption, the division between the consumption fund and the investment fund, between individual and collective consumption, between the productive and unproductive consumption fund, between the productive and unproductive investment fund, and so forth. Nobody can do that. Again, to believe otherwise is a utopian daydream.

And if the mass of the people do not accept your choice of priorities, no power on earth, even the biggest terror of Stalin, can force them to do the one key thing that you need to build socialism: have a constructive, creative, and convinced participation in the production process. There is one form of opposition that the bureaucracy has not succeeded in crushing. It is becoming bigger and bigger: the opposition which expresses itself by not caring about what is going on in production. You know the famous joke they tell in Eastern Germany: The journalist comes to a factory and asks the director: "Comrade manager, how many workers are working in your factory?" He answers, "Oh, at least half of them." This is reality in all the bureaucratized so-called socialist countries. No terror can overcome that. Only socialist democracy can overcome that, only pluralism, only the possibility of the mass of the producers and the consumers to choose between different, variants of the plan which conforms the most to their interests as they understand them.

Socialist democracy is not, a luxury and its need is not limited to the most advanced industrial countries. It is true of China; it is true for Vietnam. It is the only way to rapidly correct the disastrous effects of grave mistakes of policy. Without pluralism, without a broad public debate, without a legal opposition, it might take 15 years, it might take 25 years, it might, take 30 years before you correct those mistakes. We have seen the historical record and it shows the terrible price the working class has to pay if you take such a long time before you correct your mistakes.

Mistakes in themselves are unavoidable. As Comrade Lenin said, the real key for a revolutionary is not that he avoids making mistakes (nobody avoids making mistakes) but how he goes about correcting them. Without internal party democracy, without the right to demonstrate, without the non-banning of factions or parties, without free public debate, you have great obstacles in correcting mistakes and you will pay a heavy price for this. So we are absolutely in favor of the right, to different tendencies, full internal democracy, and the non-banning of factions or parties.

I do not say the right to factions, because that is a false formulation. Factions are a sign of illness in a party. In a healthy party you have no factions; a healthy party from the point of view of both the political line and the internal party regime. But the right not to be thrown out of the party, if you create a faction, is a lesser evil than being thrown out and stifling the internal life of a party through excessive forbidding of internal debate.

It is not an easy question, especially in a proletarian party. The more revolutionary vanguard organizations are rooted in the working class, the less is their number of students and other non-proletarian members (I do not say that it is bad to have students or intellectuals; you need them, but they should not be the majority in a revolutionary organization).

The more workers you have in your organization, the better you are implanted in the working class, the more likely you are to come up with the concrete problems of the class. Within that general framework is to be placed the functional nature of a vanguard organization for the class struggle, for the revolution, and for building socialism. You should never forget that there is a strict dialectical interrelation between the three. Otherwise we get off the track and we do not fulfil the historical role which we want to fulfil: to help the masses, the exploited and the oppressed of the world, build a classless society, a world socialist federation.