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Che Guevara's Final Verdict on the Soviet Economy

By John Riddell

One of the most important developments in Cuban Marxism in recent years has been increased attention to the writings of Ernesto Che Guevara on the economics and politics of the transition to socialism.

A milestone in this process was the publication in 2006 by Ocean Press and Cuba's Centro de Estudios Che Guevara of *Apuntes criticos a la economía política* [Critical Notes on Political Economy], a collection of Che's writings from the years 1962 to 1965, many of them previously unpublished. The book includes a lengthy excerpt from a letter to Fidel Castro, entitled "Some Thoughts on the Transition to Socialism." In it, in extremely condensed comments, Che presented his views on economic development in the Soviet Union.[1]

In 1965, the Soviet economy stood at the end of a period of rapid growth that had brought improvements to the still very low living standards of working people. Soviet prestige had been enhanced by engineering successes in defense production and space exploration. Most Western observers then considered that it showed more dynamism than its U.S. counterpart.

At that time, almost the entire Soviet productive economy was owned by the state. It was managed by a privileged bureaucracy that consolidated its control in the 1920s under the leadership of Joseph Stalin. Managers were rewarded on the basis of fulfilling production norms laid down from above; workers were commonly paid by the piece.

Political economy of the transition

Che's analysis was more pessimistic than most Western commentators, pointing to problems rooted in the Soviet economy's fundamental nature. Far from being socialist in character, he said, this economy actually yoked together incompatible elements, both capitalist and non-capitalist. He also pointed out that the "political economy" — that is, the political and economic laws of motion — of societies in transition to socialism "has not yet been formulated, let alone studied."[2]

His diagnosis, unique in its time, identified key weaknesses that contributed to the Soviet economy's stagnation, decline, and finally, only 25 years later, its total collapse.

In "Thoughts on the Transition," Che traces the troubles of the Soviet economy back to the introduction in 1921, under Lenin's leadership, of the New Economic Policy (NEP), which "opened the door to the old capitalist production relationships." Che notes that "Lenin called these relationships state capitalism."[3]

In the final period of his life, Lenin questioned the "presumed usefulness" of NEP categories such as "profits" in relations among state enterprises, Che says. Further, Lenin was disturbed by ominous divisions inside the Communist Party, to which he drew attention in his final writings. "If [Lenin] had lived, he would have quickly altered the relationships established under the NEP." But in fact, "the economic and legal framework of Soviet society today is based on the NEP, and incorporates the old capitalist relationships."

Incompatible elements

Che says that the capitalist features of Soviet society may be termed "pre-monopolist" because they lack the dynamism of competition and cooperation that produced capitalist trusts like General Motors and Ford. "The current system restricts development through capitalist competition but does not abolish its categories or establish new categories on a higher level," he says. Individual material interest has supposedly become the lever for development, but is robbed of its effectiveness by the fact that Soviet society "does not exhibit exploitation," Che says.[4] Given the presence of these capitalist features in Soviet societies, he states, "humanity does not develop its spectacular productive potential and does not emerge as the conscious architect of the new society."

Capitalist competition and exploitation having been abolished, what can serve as the driving force of economic development?, Che asks. The USSR relies on material incentives, but these reproduce the social irresponsibility characteristic of capitalism.

Moreover, material incentives are extended to "non-productive economic sectors" and applied also to the "leaders," thus "opening the door to corruption" — a phenomenon that was to become pervasive in the Soviet bureaucracy.

It follows logically that such a privileged officialdom will develop distinct political interests and goals antagonistic to those of working people in the Soviet Union and worldwide. Che's well-

documented criticisms of Soviet foreign policy — for example its failure to lend effective assistance to Vietnam, point to such a conclusion.[5] Forty years earlier, Leon Trotsky, leader of the Bolshevik opposition to the rise of Stalinism, held that the Russian revolution had been undermined by a self-interested and privileged bureaucratic caste. Che, however, did not say that bureaucratism in the Soviet Union had proceeded to that point.

Law of value

Economic management through material and profit-based incentives cannot bring the desired results, Che says, because in the Soviet context "the law of value does not have free play." (The law of value is a principle of Marxist economics that holds, broadly speaking, that the prices of commodities are proportional to the amount of socially necessary labour time required to produce them.)

In the Soviet Union there is no competitive free market to reward the efficient producers and remove the inefficient, Che says. Instead, in the Soviet economy, in the last analysis, social needs take priority over market forces. The Soviet "must guarantee that the population receives a range of products at set prices," and these prices thus "lose their link with capitalist value."

Che offers no explanation of *why* Soviet authorities must subsidize the production of such consumer necessities. Among Cuban Communist leaders of the time, this fact required no explanation. They considered that, whatever the distortions of the Soviet state of the time, the working class remained in power, and had sufficient leverage to prevent the triumph of capitalist exploitation.

Soviet claims to be surging ahead of the United States economically, Che says, are based on references to higher Soviet production of steel and other basic industrial products. But this is misleading. "Steel is no longer a basic factor in measuring a country's efficiency, because we now have chemistry, automation, non-ferrous metals — and besides, there's the question of the steel's quality. The U.S. produces less steel, but a great deal of it is of superior quality."

Technological stagnation

Technical innovation in the U.S. reflected "a giddy advance" of capitalism based on "a range of totally new technologies far removed from the old productive techniques." However, in the Soviet Union, "in most economic sectors, technology has remained relatively blocked."

Che writes that "new societies achieve brilliant successes thanks to the revolutionary spirit of their first moments. But after that, progress is less swift, because "technology no longer operates as the driving force of society."

There is, however, one area where Soviet technology has scored great successes, and that is precisely in the sector where social priorities hold unquestioned sway: defense production. "This is because it is not held to the standard of profitability." Rather everything is structured to serve the new society by assuring its survival.

"But at this point the mechanism breaks down," Che cautions. "The capitalists keep their defense apparatus closely united to their productive apparatus [as a whole]."

> "All the great advances of the science of war pass over immediately to civilian technology, producing gigantic leaps forward in the quality of consumer goods. None of this takes place in the Soviet Union: the two compartments are walled off from each other."

These weaknesses of the Soviet economy have been transplanted to the more economically developed societies of Eastern Europe, where they have sparked a reaction against "the plague of bureaucracy and of excessive centralization." But the result is to give the enterprises "more and more independence in the struggle for a free market." Meanwhile the state in these countries "begins to be transformed into a guardian of capitalist relationships."

Factories are closed, and "Yugoslav — and now Polish — workers emigrate" to Western Europe. "They are slaves," Che remarks acidly, "offered by the socialist countries [to serve] the technological development of the European Common Market."

Two principles

As an alternative to this course, Che counterposes two principles for which he had argued in Cuba's debate on economic management during the previous three years.[6]

First, "communism is a phenomenon of consciousness" that cannot be captured by "quantitative economic measures." There is no identification between communist society and high income per capita, and such income calculations are in any case an abstraction.

The second principle concerns technological innovation, the basis for expanded production of material goods. The "technological seeds of socialism are found much more in developed capitalism than in the old system of so-called economic calculation" which then prevailed in the Soviet Union. This system was "taken over from a capitalism that has now been superseded but that is nonetheless taken as a model for socialist development."

Guevara is probably thinking here of the emphasis in Lenin's post-1917 writings on the need to adopt the most modern techniques and organizational principles of the Western capitalist world of that time. In his view, these principles then became inalterable principles of the Soviet economy.

Resistance to automation

The Soviet economy's weakness is evident in its "backwardness … in adopting automation, compared to its truly startling progress in the capitalist countries."

Che poses a hypothetical example: an oil refinery that needs to close down for a year for a complete technical overhaul. "What happens in the Soviet Union? Hundreds and perhaps thousands of such automation projects are piled up in the Academy of Science, but are not implemented because the factory directors cannot afford the luxury of not fulfilling their plan

during a year." What is more, "if the factory is automated, they will be ordered to get more production."

Soviet factory managers were rewarded in terms of fulfillment of production norms set down in their ministry's plan. In Che's example, the manager of the automated factory gets penalized for the year of downtime and receives no compensating reward. "For them, achieving higher productivity is fundamentally of no concern." Applying capitalist incentives to socialized enterprises thus obstructs technological advances while bringing none of the benefits of a true capitalist market.

The way forward is to "eliminate capitalist categories: commercial transactions among enterprises, bank interest, use of direct material incentives as a lever, etc., while adopting capitalism's latest administrative and technological advances."

Administration and technology

Che sees an example of such advanced administrative techniques in dominant capitalist corporations like General Motors, which, he points out, employs more workers than the entire Cuban nationalized economy. In such enterprises, administration is tightly linked to technology, and both are constantly in flux, adjusting to the development of capitalism as a whole. In socialism, by contrast, administration and technology "have been separated off as two different aspects of the problem, and one of them has remained totally static."[7]

Referring ironically to the destructive effect of material stimulants, Che concludes that the challenge is "how to integrate people into their work in such a fashion that what we call 'material disincentives' will be unnecessary, that every worker will feel the urgent need to support the revolution and will thus experience work as a pleasure."

Worker management

Che concedes that this is far from the case in Cuba. His critics, he says, are correct in pointing out that "workers do not participate in drawing up plans, in administration of state enterprises, and so on." But the critics see the remedy for this in material incentives.

> "This is the nub of the question. In our opinion it is an error to propose that the workers manage the enterprises … as representatives of the enterprise in an antagonistic relationship to the state." Each worker should manage the enterprise "as one among many, as a representative of all the others [in society]."

Che's concept of worker management based on revolutionary consciousness rather than material incentives is a decisive advance. It contrasts strikingly with all the models of economic management then current in the USSR and its allies, including both the top-down administrative centralization identified with the Stalin era and the profit-seeking self-managed enterprises of Yugoslavia.

Yet Che leaves his suggestion tantalizingly undeveloped. His text concludes on a note of puzzlement at the unresolved nature of the issues he is addressing — a tone reminiscent in some ways of Lenin's final writings.[8]

Che endorses the widely held view that a centralized plan must utilize each element of production in a rational fashion, "and this cannot depend on [decisions of] a workers' assembly or the outlook of a worker." Still, he concedes, "when the central apparatus and intermediary levels have little knowledge, action by the workers is more useful, from a practical point of view." One suspects that Che, in his practical experience, must often have found rank-and-file workers to have had more knowledge and better judgment than administrative cadres.

A note of uncertainty

Che's text ends by emphasizing the unresolved nature of the problem. "Our experience has taught us two things that have become axiomatic: a well-place technical cadre can achieve much more than all the workers of a factory, and a leadership cadre assigned to a factory can transform it, for better or worse." But why is it that a new factory manager can change everything? "We have not yet found any answer [to this question]," Che admits. The answer must be closely related, he concludes, to the still unformulated political economy of societies in transition to socialism.

The collection of Che's writings in *Apuntos critiquos* makes available much of Che's work devoted to laying foundations for such a political economy. It includes his trenchant critique of the official Soviet *Manual of Political Economy* and extensive minutes of Che's meetings with collaborators in Cuba's Ministry of Industry from 1962 to 1964. (Ocean Press has announced a forthcoming English-language edition.)

Yet when Che sent Fidel Castro these "Reflexiones," he was not retiring to a period of study but advancing to the fields of revolutionary battle in Africa and Latin America. He evidently believed that the economic challenge he highlighted would be resolved above all through new revolutionary advances internationally.

'21st Century Socialism'

More than 40 years ago after Che fell in battle in Bolivia, his spirit is triumphant in the rise of revolutionary struggles in Latin America. The publication of *Apuntes críticos* is evidence of new attention in Cuba to Che's theoretical writings, as the country searches for ways to continue its socialist experiment. Meanwhile, Venezuelan revolutionists have initiated a discussion of "21st Century Socialism" that builds on Che's thought, while going beyond it in significant ways.

Like Che, Venezuela's revolutionary Bolivarians reject the model of the Stalinist Soviet Union and aim instead to build a socialism founded on the initiative of the ranks. Like Che, they recoil from the danger of a bureaucratic layer of privileged officials. But where Che writes of "communist consciousness," the Venezuelans talk of "protagonism." This shifts the emphasis from individual awareness to agency, that is, to initiative, responsibility, and decision at the base.

And the great campaigns of the Venezuelan revolutionary process — the "missions" — have implemented vast centralized projects for health care, education, housing, etc., by devolving authority downwards to rank-and-file committees and councils.

To be sure, Venezuela is still a capitalist society, in which the challenges of conquering the foundations of capitalist power and instituting workers' management in the factories remain unresolved.

When capitalism has been overthrown and the main elements of the economy socialized, the political economy of the transitional society must resolve more than the challenge of properly balancing national planning with rank-and-file initiative. Economic problems must be solved: among them, how investment funds will be allocated; how the efficiency of investment will be measured; how raw materials will be allocated and their supply assured; and how prices will be set, as a basis both for accounting in the nationalized economy and for exchange in consumer markets.

A full answer to these questions, which would provide us with the "political economy of transition" that Che called for, has not yet been elaborated, and can be developed only through struggle and experience. Che's insights, however, help pose these questions in a framework in which a solution can be formulated.

Footnotes

[1]. Ernesto Che Guevara, "Algunas reflexiones sobre la transición socialista," in *Apuntes críticos a la economía política,* Ocean Books: Melbourne, 2006, pp. 9-20.

[2]. Che and other Cuban communist leaders of the time considered the Soviet Union and Communist-led states in Eastern Europe, North Korea, North Vietnam, China, and Cuba to be states that had overthrown capitalism and established the foundations for a transition to socialism. Some Marxists term such societies "workers' states." The Cuban view was contested in the workers' movement at the time, above all by the Maoist leadership in China, which argued that the Soviet Union and its allies had by the 1960s returned to capitalism.

[3]. For Lenin's final comments on this topic, see Lenin, *Collected Works*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965, vol. 33, pp. 419-421 ("Fourth Congress of the Communist International" and 472-473 ("On Cooperation"). These and other writings by Lenin are also available at www.marxists.org.

[4]. The common, dictionary meaning of "exploitation" is mistreatment of people for the benefit of others. By that definition, the social privilege Che describes in the USSR would qualify as "exploitation." But he was using the word in its Marxist sense, which refers to an inherent characteristic of wage labour under capitalism. Marxism holds that a portion of the value produced by a worker, the "surplus value," is appropriated as profit by the employer, the owner of the means of production. Many Marxist opponents of Stalinism, including both Leon Trotsky and Che Guevara, denied that exploitation in this sense of the word took place in the USSR. This is disputed by those who claim that the USSR had by Che's time returned to capitalism.

[5]. In "Message to the Tricontinental," published in 1967, Che wrote "Vietnam, a nation representing the aspirations and hopes for victory of the disinherited of the world, is tragically alone. This people must endure the pounding of U.S. technology — in the south almost without defenses, in the north with some possibilities of defense — but always alone. The solidarity of the progressive world with the Vietnamese peoples has something of the bitter

irony of the plebians cheering on the gladiators in the Roman Circus. To wish the victim success is not enough; one must share his or her fate. One must join that victim in death or in victory." Che Guevara Reader, Melbourne: Ocean Press, 2003, p. 352.

[6]. Seventeen contributions to this debate are collected in Bertram Silverman, Man and Socialism in Cuba: The Great Debate, New York: Atheneum, 1971. Che's concluding article in this discussion, "Socialism and Man in Cuba," is posted at www.marxists.org/archive/guevara/1965/03/man-socialism.htm. A similar collection is available in Spanish from Ocean Press under the title El Gran Debate. For an incisive discussion of Che's economic thought, see Carlos Tablada, Che Guevara: Economics and Politics in the Transition to Socialism. New York: Pathfinder Press, 1989.

[7]. The decline of General Motors since the 1960s suggests that its internal regime may have been less optimal than Che suggests and may have suffered from some ills analogous to those of the Stalinist Soviet economy.

[8]. See volumes 33, 36, 42, and 45 of the edition of Lenin's Collected Works published by Progress Publishers in Moscow in the 1960s or go to www.marxists.org. These writings are collected in Lenin's Final Fight, New York: Pathfinder Press, 1995.

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From Marx to Morales: Indigenous Socialism and the Latin Americanization of Marxism

By John Riddell

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Over the past decade, a new rise of mass struggles in Latin America has sparked an encounter between revolutionists of that region and many of those based in the imperialist countries. In many of these struggles, as in Bolivia under the presidency of Evo Morales, Indigenous peoples are in the lead.

Latin American revolutionists are enriching Marxism in the field of theory as well as of action. This article offers some introductory comments indicating ways in which their ideas are linking up with and drawing attention to important but little-known aspects of Marxist thought.

Eurocentrism

A good starting point is provided by the comment often heard from Latin American revolutionists that much of Marxist theory is marked by a "Eurocentric" bias. They understand Eurocentrism as the belief that Latin American nations must replicate the evolution of Western European societies, through to the highest possible level of capitalist development, before a socialist revolution is possible. Eurocentrism is also understood to imply a stress on the primacy of industrialization for social progress and on the need to raise physical production in a fashion that appears to exclude peasant and Indigenous realities and to point toward the dissolution of Indigenous culture.[1]

Marx's celebrated statement that "no social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed"[2] is sometimes cited as evidence of a Eurocentric bias in Marxism. Karl Kautsky and Georgi Plekhanov, Marxist theorists of the pre-1914 period, are viewed as classic exponents of this view. Latin American writer Gustavo Pérez Hinojosa quotes Kautsky's view that "workers can rule only where the capitalist system has achieved a high level of development"[3] — that is, not yet in Latin America.

The pioneer Marxists in Latin American before 1917 shared that perspective. But after the Russian Revolution a new current emerged, now often called "Latin American Marxism." Argentine theorist Néstor Kohan identifies the pioneer Peruvian Communist José Carlos Mariátegui as its founder. Mariátegui, Kohen says, "opposed Eurocentric schemas and populist

efforts to rally workers behind different factions of the bourgeoisie" and "set about recapturing 'Inca communism' as a precursor of socialist struggles."[4]

National subjugation

Pérez Hinojosa and Kohen both take for granted that Latin American struggles today, as in Mariátegui's time, combine both anti-imperialist and socialist components. This viewpoint links back to the analysis advanced by the Communist International in Lenin's time of a world divided between imperialist nations and subjugated peoples.[5] Is this framework still relevant at a time when most poor countries have formal independence? The central role of anti-imperialism in recent Latin American struggles would seem to confirm the early Communist International's analysis.

Pérez Hinojosa tells us that Mariátegui recognized the impossibility of national capitalist development in semi-colonial countries like Peru. The revolution would be "socialist from its beginnings but would go through two stages" in realizing the tasks first of bourgeois democratic and then of socialist revolution. Moreover, the Peruvian theorist held that "this socialist revolution would be marked by a junction with the historic basis of socialization: the Indigenous communities, the survivals of primitive agrarian communism."[6]

Subsequently, says Kohen, the "brilliant team of the 1920s," which included Julio Antonio Mella in Cuba, Farabundo Martí in El Salvador, and Augusto Sandino in Nicaragua, "was replaced … by the echo of Stalin's mediocre schemas in the USSR," which marked a return to a mechanical "Eurocentrist" outlook.[7]

Writing from the vantage point of Bolivia's tradition of Indigenous insurgency, Alvaro García Linera attributes Eurocentric views in his country to Marxism as a whole, as expressed by both Stalinist and Trotskyist currents. He states that Marxism's "ideology of industrial modernisation" and "consolidation of the national state" implied the "'inferiority' of the country's predominantly peasant societies."[8]

Cuban revolution

In Kohen's view, the grip of "bureaucratism and dogmatism" was broken "with the rise of the Cuban revolution and the leadership of Castro and Guevara."[9] Guevara's views are often linked to those of Mariátegui with regard to the nature of Latin American revolution — in Guevara's words, either "a socialist revolution or a caricature of a revolution."[10] That claim was based on convictions regarding the primacy of consciousness and leadership in revolutionary transitions that were also held by Mariátegui.

Guevara also applied this view to his analysis of the Cuban state and of Stalinized Soviet reality. Guevara inveighed against the claim of Soviet leaders of his time that rising material production would bring socialism, despite the political exclusion, suffering, and oppression imposed on the working population.[11] (See "Che Guevara's Final Verdict on Soviet Economy," in *Socialist Voice, June 9, 2008*.)

Marx's views

In Kohen's opinion, the Cuban revolution's leading role continued in the 1970s, when it "revived the revolutionary Marxism of the 1920s (simultaneously anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist) as well as Marx's more unfamiliar works—above all his later works that study colonialism and peripheral and dependent societies. In these writings Marx overcomes the Eurocentric views of his youth."[12]

Kohen identifies the insights of the "Late Marx" as follows:

- History does not follow an unvarying evolutionary path.
- Western Europe does not constitute a single evolutionary centre through which stages of historical development are radiated outwards to the rest of the world.
- "Subjugated peoples do not experience 'progress' so long as they remain under the boot of imperialism."[13]

Latin American thought here rests on the mature Marx's views on capitalism's impact on colonial societies, such as Ireland. It also intersects with Marx's late writings and research known to us primarily through Teodor Shanin's *Late Marx and the Russian Road*.[14] Shanin's book can now be usefully reread as a commentary on today's Latin American struggles.

Marx devoted much of his last decade to study of Russia and of Indigenous societies in North America. His limited writings on these questions focused on the Russian peasant commune, the *mir*, which then constituted the social foundation of agriculture in that country.

Russia's peasant communes

The Russian Marxist circle led by Plekhanov, ancestor of the Bolshevik party, believed that the *mir* was doomed to disappear as Russia was transformed by capitalist development. We now know that Marx did not agree. In a letter to Vera Zasulich, written in 1881 but not published until 1924, he wrote that "the commune is the fulcrum for social regeneration in Russia." The "historical inevitability" of the evolutionary course mapped out in *Capital*, he stated, is "*expressly* restricted to *the countries of Western Europe*."[15]

The preliminary drafts of Marx's letter, included in Shanin's book, display essential agreement with the view of the revolutionary populist current in Russia, the "People's Will," that the commune could coexist harmoniously with a developing socialist economy.[16]

Ethnological Notebooks

These drafts drew on Marx's extensive studies of Indigenous societies during that period, a record of which is available in his little-known *Ethnological Notebooks*.[17] We find his conclusions summarized in a draft of his letter to Zasulich: "The vitality of primitive communities was incomparably greater than that of Semitic, Greek, Roman, etc. societies, and, *a fortiori*, that of modern capitalist societies."[18]

In her study of these notebooks, Christine Ward Gaily states that where such archaic forms persist, Marx depicts them fundamentally "as evidence of resistance to the penetration of state-associated institutions," which he views as intrinsically oppressive.[19] The clear implication is that such archaic survivals should be defended and developed.

The Marxists of Lenin's time were not aware of this evolution in Marx's thinking. Thus Antonio Gramsci could write, a few weeks after the Russian October uprising, "This is the revolution against Karl Marx's *Capital*. In Russia, Marx's *Capital* was more the book of the bourgeoisie than of the proletariat."[20] Yet despite their limited knowledge of Marx's views, the revolutionary generation of Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky, Bukharin, Gramsci, and Lukács reasserted Marx's revolutionary stance in combat with the "Eurocentrist" view associated with Karl Kautsky and the pre-war Socialist International that socialist revolution must await capitalism's fullest maturity and collapse.

Shanin generalizes from Marx's approach to Russia in 1881 in a way that links to a second characteristic of Latin American revolution. "The purest forms of 'scientific socialism' … invariably proved politically impotent," he argues. "It has been the integration of Marxism with the indigenous [i.e. home-grown] political traditions which has underlain all known cases of internally generated and politically effective revolutionary transformation of society by socialists."[21]

Here we have a second field of correlation with the Latin American revolutionary experience, with its strong emphasis on associating the movement for socialism with the tradition of anti-colonial struggle associated with the figures of the great aboriginal leaders and of Bolívar, Martí, and Sandino. This fusion of traditions emerges as a unique strength of Latin American Marxism.

Mariátegui captured this thought in a well-known passage:

> "We certainly do not wish socialism in America to be a copy and imitation. It must be a heroic creation. We must give life to an Indo-American socialism reflecting our own reality and in our own language."[22]

Following the October revolution of 1917, Marx's vision of the *mir*'s potential was realized in practice. The *mir* had been in decline for decades, and by 1917 half the peasants' land was privately owned. But in the great agrarian reform of 1917-18, the peasants revived the *mir* and adopted it as the basic unit of peasant agriculture. During the next decade, peasant communes co-existed constructively with the beginnings of a socialist economy. By 1927, before the onset of Stalinist forced collectivization, 95% of peasant land was already communally owned.[23]

There is a double parallel here with present Latin American experience. First, the Bolsheviks' alliance with the peasantry is relevant in Latin American countries where the working class, in the strict sense of those who sell their labour power to employers, is often a minority in broad coalitions of exploited producers. Second, survivals of primitive communism, including communal landholding, are a significant factor in Indigenous struggles across this region.

National emancipation

A third correspondence can be found in the Bolsheviks' practice toward minority peoples of the East victimized and dispossessed by Tsarist Russian settler colonialism. Too often, discussions of the Bolsheviks' policy on the national question stop short with Stalin and Lenin's writings of 1913-1916, ignoring the evolution of Bolshevik policy during and after the 1917 revolution. Specifically:

- The later Bolsheviks did not limit themselves to the criteria of nationhood set out by Stalin in 1913.[24] They advocated and implemented self-determination for oppressed peoples who were not, at the time of the 1917 revolution, crystallized nations or nationalities.
- They went beyond the concept that self-determination could be expressed only through separation. Instead, they accepted the realization of self-determination through various forms of federation.
- They implemented self-determination in a fashion that was not always territorial.
- Their attitude toward the national cultures of minority peoples was not neutral. Instead, they committed substantial political and state resources to planning and encouraging the development of these cultures.[25]

On all these points, the Bolshevik experience closely matches the revolutionary policies toward Indigenous peoples now being implemented in Bolivia and other Latin American countries.

Ecology and materialism

Finally, a word on ecology. The boldest governmental statements on the world's ecological crisis are coming from Cuba, Bolivia, and other anti-imperialist governments in Latin America.[26] The influence of Indigenous struggles is felt here. Bolivian President Evo Morales points to the leading role of Indigenous peoples, "called upon by history to convert ourselves into the vanguard of the struggle to defend nature and life."[27]

This claim rests on an approach by many Indigenous movements to ecology that is inherently revolutionary. Most First-World ecological discussion focuses on technical and market devices, such as carbon trading, taxation, and offsets, that aim to preserve as much as possible of a capitalist economic system that is inherently destructive to the natural world. Indigenous movements, by contrast, begin with the demand for a new relationship of humankind to our natural environment, sometimes expressed in the slogan, "Liberate Mother Earth."[28]

These movements often express their demand using an unfamiliar terminology of ancestral spiritual wisdom — but behind those words lies a worldview that can be viewed as a form of materialism.

In pre-conquest Andean society, says Peruvian Indigenous leader Rosalía Paiva, "Each was a part of all, and all were of the soil. The soil could never belong to us because we are its sons and daughters, and we belong to the soil."[29]

Bolivian Indigenous writer Marcelo Saavedra Vargas holds that "It is capitalist society that rejects materialism. It makes war on the material world and destroys it. We, on the other hand, embrace the material world, consider ourselves part of it, and care for it."[30]

This approach is reminiscent of Marx's thinking, as presented by John Bellamy Foster in *Marx's Ecology*. It is entirely appropriate to interpret "Liberate Mother Earth" as equivalent to "close the metabolic rift."[31]

Hugo Chávez says that in Venezuela, 21st Century Socialism will be based not only on Marxism but also on Bolivarianism, Indigenous socialism, and Christian revolutionary traditions.[32] Latin American Marxism's capacity to link up in this way with what Shanin calls vernacular revolutionary traditions is a sign of its vitality and promise.

I will conclude with a story told by the Peruvian Marxist and Indigenous leader Hugo Blanco. A member of his community, he tells us, conducted some Swedish tourists to a Quechua village near Cuzco. Impressed by the collectivist spirit of the Indigenous community, one of the tourists commented, "*This is like communism*."

"No," responded their guide, "*Communism is like this*."[33]

Related Reading

- Hugo Blanco. *The Fight for Indigenous Rights in the Andes Today*
- John Riddell. *Comintern: Revolutionary Internationalism in Lenin's Time*
- John Riddell. *The Russian Revolution and National Freedom*

Footnotes

[1] "Alvaro García Linera, "Indianismo and Marxism" (translated by Richard Fidler), in *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal.*
David Bedford, "Marxism and the Aboriginal Question: The Tragedy of Progress," in *Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1 (1994), 102-103.
Hugo Blanco Galdos, letter to the author, December 17, 2007.

[2] Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, in Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Selected Works*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969, vol. 1, p. 504.

[3] Gustavo Pérez Hinojosa, "La heterodoxia marxista de Mariátegui." Rebelión, October 30, 2007..

[4] Néstor Kohan, "El marxismo latinoamericano y la crítica del eurocentrismo," in *Con sangre en las venas*, Mexico: Ocean Sur, 2007, pp. 10, 11.

[5] See, for example, V.I. Lenin's report on the National and Colonial Questions to the Communist International's second congress, in *Collected Works,* Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969, vol. 31, pp. 240-41; and the subsequent congress discussion and resolution, in John Riddell, ed., *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite!*, New York: Pathfinder Press, 1991, vol. 1, pp. 216-290.

[6] Hinojosa, "Mariátegui."

[7] Kohen, "Eurocentrismo," p. 10.

[8] García Linera, "Indianismo."

[9] Kohen, "Eurocentrismo," p. 10.

[10] Ernesto Che Guevara, "Message to the Tricontinental," in *Che Guevara Reader*, Melbourne: Ocean Press, 2003, p. 354.

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[27] Ibid.

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[30] Interview with Marcelo Saavedra Vargas, April 21, 2008.

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Socialist Voice #251, June 8, 2008

Bolivian President Evo Morales Condemns Europe's Anti-Migrant Law

Introduction. *On Wednesday June 18, the European Parliament voted by a large majority to adopt a "Return Directive" that includes an administrative detention period for irregular migrants of up to 18 months. This effectively criminalizes these migrants, who will be deprived of their freedom and detained in inhumane and improperly-run structures, without having committed any crime.*

Furthermore, the directive foresees the possibility to detain and expel unaccompanied minors, to return migrants to transit countries, different from their home countries, plus the possibility of enforcing a re-entry ban valid for the whole of Europe for up to 5 years.

Many procedural guarantees and legal benefits for migrants wishing to appeal against a return decision have disappeared from the final text, therefore also endangering the rights of those migrants who could lawfully claim refugee protection status.

The following critique of the Directive was issued by Bolivia's President Evo Morales. We have taken the text from the on-line edition of The Dominion.

An open letter to the European Parliament

By Evo Morales

Up until the end of the World War II, Europe was an emigrant continent. Tens of thousands of Europeans departed for the Americas to colonize, to escape hunger, the financial crisis, the wars or European totalitarianisms and the persecution of ethnic minorities.

Today, I am following with concern the process of the so called "Return Directive". The text, validated last June 5th by the Interior Ministers of 27 countries in the European Union, comes up for a vote on June 18 in the European Parliament. I feel that it is a drastic hardening of the detention and expulsion conditions for undocumented immigrants, regardless of the time they have lived in the European countries, their work situation, their family ties, or their ability and achievements to integrate.

Europeans arrived en masse to Latin and North America, without visas or conditions imposed on them by the authorities. They were simply welcomed, and continue to be, in our American continent, which absorbed at that time the European economic misery and political crisis. They came to our continent to exploit the natural wealth and to transfer it to Europe, with a high cost for the original populations in America. As is the case of our Cerro Rico de Potosi and its fabulous silver mines that gave monetary mass to the European continent from the 16th to the 19th centuries. The people, the wealth and the rights of the migrant Europeans were always respected.

Today, the European Union is the main destiny for immigrants around the world which is a consequence of its positive image of space and prosperity and public freedoms. The great majority of immigrants go to the EU to contribute to this prosperity, not to take advantage of it. They are employed in public works, construction, and in services to people in hospitals, which the Europeans cannot do or do not want. They contribute to the demographic dynamics of the European continent, maintaining the relationship between the employed and the retired which provides for the generous social security system and helps the dynamics of internal markets and social cohesion. The migrant offers a solution to demographic and financial problems in the EU.

For us, our emigrants represent help in development that Europeans do not give us – since few countries really reach the minimum objective of 0.7% of its GDP in development assistance. Latin America received, in 2006, remittance (monies sent back) totaling

68,000 million dollars, or more than the total foreign investment in our countries. On the worldwide level it reached $300,000 million dollars which is more than US $104,000 million authorized for development assistance. My own country, Bolivia, received more than 10% of the GDP in remittance (1,100 million dollars) or a third of our annual Exports of natural gas.

Unfortunately, "Return Directive" project is an enormous complication to this reality. If we can conceive that each State or group of States can define their migratory policies in every sovereignty, we cannot accept that the fundamental rights of the people be denied to our compatriots and brother Latin-Americans. The "Return Directive" foresees the possibility of jailing undocumented immigrants for up to 18 months before their expulsion – or "distancing", according to the terms of the directive. 18 months! Without a judgment or justice! As it stands today the project text of the directive clearly violates articles 2, 3, 5,6,7,8 and 9 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948.

In particular, Article 13 of the Declaration states:

> 1. All persons have a right to move freely and to choose their residence in the territory of a State.
>
> 2. All persons have the right to leave any country, including their own, and to return to their country.

And, the worst of all, the possibility exists for the mothers of families with minor children to be arrested – without regards to the family and school situation – in these internment centers where we know that depression, hunger strikes, and suicide happens. How can we accept without reacting that our compatriots and Latin American brothers without documents, of which the great majority have been working and integrating for years, are concentrated in camps. On what side is the duty of humanitarian action? Where is the "freedom of movement," protection against arbitrary imprisonment?

On a parallel, the European Union is trying to convince the Andean Community the Nations (Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru) to sign an "Association Agreement" that includes the

third pillar of the Free Trade Agreement, of the same nature and content as that imposed by the United States. We are under intense pressure from the European Commission to accept conditions of great liberalization of our trade, financial services, intellectual property rights and our public works. In addition under so called "judicial protection" we are being pressured about the nationalization of the water, gas and telecommunications that were done on the Worldwide Workers' Day. I ask, in that case, where is the "judicial protection" for our women, adolescents, children and workers who look for better horizons in Europe?

Under these conditions, if the "Return Directive" is passed, we will be ethically unable to deepen the negotiations with the European Union, and we reserve the right to legislate such that the European Citizens have the same obligations for visas that they impose on the Bolivians from the first of April 2007, according to the diplomatic principal of reciprocity. We have not exercised it up until now, precisely because we were awaiting good signs from the EU.

The world, its continents, its oceans and its poles know important global difficulties: global warming, contamination, the slow but sure disappearance of the energy resources and biodiversity while hunger and poverty increase in every country, debilitating our societies. To make migrants, whether they have documents or not, the scapegoats of these global problems, is not the solution. It does not meet any reality. The social cohesion problems that Europe is suffering from are not the fault of the migrants, rather the result of the model of development imposed by the North, which destroys the planet and dismembers human societies.

In the name of the people of Bolivia, of all of my brothers on the continent and regions of the world like the Maghreb and the countries of Africa, I appeal to the conscience of the European leaders and deputies, of the peoples, citizens and activists of Europe, for them not to approve the text of the "Return Directive". As it is today, it is a directive of vengeance. I also call on the European Union to elaborate, over the next months, a migration policy that is respectful of human rights, which allows us to maintain this dynamics that is helpful to both continents and that repairs once and for all the tremendous historic debt, both economic and ecological that the European countries owe to a large part of the Third World, and to close once and for all the open veins of Latin America. They cannot fail today in their "policies of integration" as they have failed with their supposed "civilizing mission" from colonial times.

Receive all of you, authorities, Euro parliamentarians, brothers and sisters, fraternal greetings from Bolivia. And in particular our solidarity to all of the "clandestinos."

Evo Morales Ayma, President of the Republic of Bolivia

Socialist Voice #252, June 22, 2008

Harvest of Injustice: The Oppression of Migrant Workers on Canadian Farms

By Adriana Paz

Some say that nothing happens by chance. At the very least, it was a fortunate accident that my first job, when I arrived in Canada from Bolivia three years ago, was in a tomato greenhouse in South Delta, British Columbia — one of the first in the province to request migrant farm workers from Mexico under the federal Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP). My job was to run from the office managers' office to the greenhouse and back relaying information on workers' productivity levels.

My first observation was that brown bodies are the pickers and white bodies are the managers. I naively asked my boss why there are no Canadians picking tomatoes. He answered me simply, "Because this is not a job for them."

That was my first lesson in Canadian social history. In B.C., most farm workers are and have long been immigrants of colour, including recently a growing number of seasonal migrants under SAWP and a related federal scheme, the Temporary Foreign Workers Program. Battered by the whims of global capital and local government policy, farm workers are the most vulnerable part of the work force, facing extreme job and economic insecurity.

According to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives BC, most farm workers in the province are immigrants from India, chiefly women in their 50s and 60s who came to Canada under the family reunification program. Lack of language skills and the obligation to their families to repay money advanced for their immigration and settlement pressure them to accept working conditions that Canadian workers find unacceptable.

Their plight is worsened by the Farm Labour Contractor (FLC) system, unique to the agricultural sector. The FLCs act as *coyotes* or intermediaries between farm workers and greenhouses/farms, determining how workers will get to the job, how long they will work, what they will earn, and so on. Obviously the FLCs do nothing to ensure respect for employment standards and safety regulations, leading to all sort of violations while the provincial authorities close their eyes.

For generations, South Asians have toiled in the fields of British Columbia under unsafe and exploitative conditions, enduring low wages and long hours of hard work while creating massive profits for agrobusiness.

Although fully informed about the corrupt FLCs and their blatant violations of employment and safety regulations, the provincial government decided in 2001/2002 to reduce enforcement. Then in 2003/2004 they excluded farm workers from various provisions of the Employment Standards Act, leaving this group of racialized labour even more vulnerable to hyperexploitation.

How to create a labour shortage

Since 2000, farm operators in B.C. have been complaining of a shortage of labour to harvest their crops. Little science is needed find the cause. When wages are low, often less than the legal minimum, and working conditions are substandard, workers are unwilling to work in agriculture if they have a choice.

The farm operators are of course passing on downwards the immense pressures they face from the forces of globalization and the power of agribusiness monopolies. Far from providing protection against these profiteers, the government, urged on by the farm/greenhouse operators, has adopted policies that have worsened the "labour shortage."

Nothing was done to raise farm labour wages or to increase the supply of immigrant labour. On the contrary, their measures serve to make agricultural labour not only unattractive but unlivable. To make matters worse, Citizenship and Immigration Canada in 2003 restricted the family reunification program, reducing the traditional South Asian labour source of those utilizing this program to immigrate to Canada.

Meanwhile the federal government is closing the door to permanent immigration of farm workers while steadily moving towards a U.S-style policy based on temporary migration.

All this is of course the total opposite of the "free market" policies that the government claims to support. In a free market, when demand for something goes up, so should its price. If there's a labour shortage in Canadian agriculture, wages should tend upwards until the supply of labour increases. By aggressively expanding Temporary Worker Programs, the government is manipulating market conditions to keep wages and working conditions low in order to increase corporate profits.

Government-imposed servitude

Ottawa's seasonal agricultural workers program (SAWP) is an old federal initiative that started in 1966 with Caribbean countries. Mexico and Guatemala were incorporated in the seventies. SAWP operates in Alberta, Quebec, Manitoba, Ontario, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island, supplying 20% of seasonal farm jobs on vegetable, fruit, and tobacco farms and greenhouses. B.C. was incorporated in 2004.

Under the SAWP a farm worker comes under a temporary work permit visa tied to one single employer for periods of up to eight months. Before leaving the home country, the worker must sign a contract with the employer specifying wages and terms of employment — in other words, sign away the right while in Canada to seek better conditions. Those seeking permits are not allowed to bargain collectively with their prospective employer. Impoverished and dispossessed workers abroad stand alone against the power of employer and government. The employer is able to dictate contract terms.

Justicia/Justice for Migrant Workers-BC calls on Ottawa to offer the migrant workers permanent status — for them and their families — on their arrival in Canada. In fact, as things stand, workers have no option to apply for permanent status. They are sent home as soon as their

contracts expire — or sooner, if they complain or raise concerns about poor working or living conditions..

They take with them an evaluation form from their employer, which must be given to the home government. At the end of the season, employers fill an evaluation report indicating if they would recall the workers for next season. A negative report can result in suspension from the program. Workers also report on their treatment by Canadian employers, but most of them avoid complaints for fear that this would be held against them in reapplying for work in Canada.

In the Mexican case, the government requires that applicants have less than grade three education, a farm-worker background, and strong family ties — factors believed likely to prevent them from establishing themselves in Canada as undocumented workers.

Workers get little information on what to expect in Canada. Once here, they start at or near minimum wage, exposed to long shifts of hard labour (up to 12-16 hour days in peak season). They receive no overtime pay, no paid holidays, sometimes no weekends, and no vacation pay. They are also subjected to unfair paycheck deductions for social benefits such as Unemployment Insurance and Canadian Pension Plan that they can never receive because of their “temporary” status.

The SAWP program does not provide a path to regularization of status. Migrant labourers work here for years as migrants, coming and going yearly, sometimes for their entire work life. They develop ties here and establish themselves up to a certain point, but are never able to settle with their families. This creates a pattern of extended and painful family separation. Children grow up without fathers, while men here establish separate lives, and the fabrics of relationships and communities are strained.

Immigrant-based community grassroots organizations, progressive faith groups, and the labour movement point out that such temporary worker programs depress standards for all workers in Canada. The migrant-worker programs are yet another tactic of the “divide and conquer” strategy that aims to divide and fracture the working class. It encourages a perception that migrant workers threaten the jobs and employment standards of the local population, when in fact it is the migrant-labour programs — not the workers — that threaten us all.

How to create a labour surplus

The rural economy of Mexico has been devastated in recent years by the provisions of the North American Free Trade Agreement. This is entirely intentional, reflecting NAFTA’s goal of reshaping Mexico’s economy in line with the needs of mainly U.S. corporate interests, while enriching the notoriously corrupt Mexican ruling class.

NAFTA and related policies deepen economic distress in Mexico where, according to the World Bank, 50% live in poverty and 15% in extreme poverty — about 15 million Mexicans struggling to fend off starvation. Meanwhile, Mexico, one of the world’s most unequal and unjust countries, boasts more new billionaires than Canada, including the richest man on earth, Carlos Slim.

The economic collapse of the Mexican countryside has created waves of migrants seeking a future in Mexico's large cities and in the U.S. It is estimated there could be as many as 12 million undocumented Mexicans in the U.S. Half a million brave the dangerous journey north every year. About 3,000 die each year in the attempt, mostly from exposure while crossing the unforgiving deserts of the U.S. Southwest. The migrants' remittances back home are now Mexico's largest source of foreign revenue, about $25 billion annually.

SAWP and other temporary worker programs take advantage of the huge surplus of cheap labour in Mexico that NAFTA helped to create. Through temporary worker programs, governments of both Mexico and Canada aim to manage the flow of migrants to the North for the benefit of local business elites, while stripping workers of rights and liberties.

The result is to create in this country an underclass of workers, an underclass of human beings stamped with the labels of "foreign," "undocumented," "unskilled," and "temporary." Meanwhile it relieves the Mexican government of responsibility to ensure healthy rural and urban development throughout the country.

The need to organize

The creation of this oppressed migrant workforce must be answered by a migrant labour movement with its feet and heart in the countries of both origin and destination, one that seeks real and lasting solutions to the migrant workers' problems. This movement must be based on grassroots organizing initiatives that empower workers to lead their own struggle. Real changes happen only when those most affected, those who suffer the most, are at the forefront of the struggle. If this is not the case, changes if any will be superficial and short-lived.

The Justicia/Justice for Migrant Workers collective sees its mandate as assisting those most affected — the migrant workers — in stepping to the fore and consolidating their position and participation in the movement. We help workers organize in an effective manner, avoiding possible risk of repatriation and seeking to meet their immediate and long-term needs.

We expose migrant workers' conditions and apply pressure through the media, while accompanying the workers' process of raising consciousness, and developing skills and tools drawn from their own analysis of their condition and situation. We seek to help create different types of support systems — legal, political, and moral — within the community to overcome the numerous barriers that silence migrant workers.

In B.C., unlike other provinces in the east, migrant farm workers are allowed to unionize. In some cases, unions have sought to respond to their plight, as with regard to the temporary workers employed in B.C. on the Richmond-Vancouver rapid transit line and the Golden Ears Bridge over the Fraser River. The United Food and Commercial Workers operate Migrant Support Centers in Ontario, Manitoba, Quebec, and recently B.C. Currently it is fighting for the right to represent these workers in Manitoba and Quebec.

On the whole, however, efforts by the trade union movement to defend these workers have been sporadic, and their character raises legitimate concerns.

In addition, it must be asked whether Canada's unions, with their present hierarchical and primarily white leadership structures, can effectively represent migrant workers and serve their interests. Are unions long-term allies of migrant workers, supporting their struggle not only here but in their country of origin, where the root causes are found that forced them to migrate? Should an independent migrant workers union be formed to better represent their interests by exercising their skills and building on their organizing culture and historical backgrounds?

What is certain is that regardless of the structure or model, the most affected ones — migrant workers and migrants of colour — should represent themselves. Only this will counteract their historical background of marginalization. Otherwise systemic patterns of charity and paternalism will be perpetuated, making token gestures to those most affected — the migrant workers — without changing the structures that determine their fate.

Alliances of migrant workers with other sectors, inside and outside the labour movement, should address systemic issues, such as the root causes of migration, structural and systemic racism in immigration policies and hiring systems, and so on. There are ways unions can support migrant workers other than merely "representing" or "leading" their struggle.

Support and solidarity can be expressed through respecting, facilitating, and encouraging migrant workers' self-organization instead of speaking for them and having others doing the work for them. Respect and support is also needed for grassroots organizing efforts to develop leadership and capacity within community-based organizations. This can help grassroots organizers and migrant workers develop the tools needed for their struggle for justice and dignity.

After my first "Canadian social history lesson" in the tomato greenhouse three years ago, many more followed. Undoubtedly, the most powerful and hopeful lessons came from the migrant farm workers themselves, who through the years have been resisting with admirable courage and dignity their "*patrones*" (bosses), both in their farms and the consular offices, where officials are often from the employer's side. They do this sometimes silently and sometimes loudly, accompanied by external supporters or just by themselves. They demand the right to be human beings, not just the "economic units" that global capital needs them to be.

Adriana Paz is a co-founder and organizer of Justicia/Justice for Migrant Workers-BC (J4MW), a volunteer collective based in Toronto and Vancouver that strives to promote the rights of Mexican, Caribbean, and Guatemalan workers who annually participate in the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP).

Socialist Voice has also published an important document on a related issue: "Bolivian President Evo Morales Condemns Europe's Anti-Migrant Law"

For more information on this subject, see Cultivating Farmworker Rights: Ending the Exploitation of Immigrant and Migrant Farmworkers in BC (PDF 1058 Kb) published on June 18, 2008 by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

Socialist Voice #253, June 25, 2008

Revolutionary Organization Today: Part One

By Paul Le Blanc and John Riddell

Introduction

Anyone familiar with the socialist movement in the industrialized countries today must be struck by the huge gap between what's needed — mass socialist parties with deep roots in the working class — and the reality — small groups of socialists with little influence. *Socialist Voice* is pleased to publish a two-part special feature on this critical question.

- *Part One* of this special feature contains Paul Le Blanc's talk "Lenin and the Revolutionary Party Today."
- *Part Two* is an exchange of emails between John Riddell and Paul Le Blanc about that article.
- We encourage feedback:

Part One, by noted Marxist scholar Paul Le Blanc, examines Lenin's views on revolutionary organization and their implications for the left in North America today. One key lesson, he says, is that individual socialists cannot be effective on their own — they must join with other socialists to act on, share and preserve the knowledge needed to change the world.

> "Genuine revolutionary and class-struggle knowledge, and the awareness of the people and the struggles through which such knowledge was accumulated, will surely evaporate unless some people draw together to preserve such things, and use them, and pass them on. …
>
> "[Socialists must] work together in a revolutionary socialist organization that is committed to the preservation, utilization, and spread throughout the working class of the perspectives, the knowledge, and the skills associated with the traditions of revolutionary Marxism. Without organization, their efforts will be too diffuse, too amateur, too isolated."

But, Le Blanc writes, organization by itself is not enough.

> "Attempts by small numbers of people to construct a revolutionary party – even the so-called 'nucleus of the revolutionary party' – outside the context of a broad labor-radical subculture generally tends to result in the construction of a political sect."

To avoid that trap, the revolutionary left must learn to "learn from people, to listen to them, in order to be able to share knowledge with them" — and through this process "begin, once more, to permeate broader sectors of the working class, and become a greater force among its activist layers in the labor movement and the other social movements."

After reading Le Blanc's pathbreaking article, *Socialist Voice* co-editor John Riddell emailed him a series of questions and comments, to which Le Blanc responded. Because this exchange provided important additional insights into the subject, we are publishing it as Part Two of this special feature.

We hope that others will join this discussion, by publicizing these articles and by commenting on the issues they raise in the "Feedback" feature that follows Part Two.

Le Blanc's article is below. Part Two, the exchange between Riddell and Le Blanc, is posted **here**.

About the authors

- **Paul Le Blanc**, a former member of the U.S. Socialist Workers Party, has been a long-time anti-war, anti-racist, activist in Pittsburgh. He teaches History at La Roche College. His most recent book is *Marx, Lenin, and the Revolutionary Experience* (Routledge 2006).
- **John Riddell**, co-editor of *Socialist Voice*, has been a prominent figure in the socialist movement in North America and Europe since the 1960s. He is the editor of the six-volume anthology *The Communist International in Lenin's Time*, (Pathfinder Press, 1984-1993), the author of *COMINTERN: Revolutionary Internationalism in Lenin's Time*, and a co-author of *Venezuela and the International Struggle for Socialism* (*Socialist Voice* pamphlets, 2008).

Lenin and the Revolutionary Party Today

By Paul Le Blanc

Paul Le Blanc was a guest speaker at the "Socialism 2008" conference of the International Socialist Organization in Chicago, June 20, 2008. This article is based on his talk.

We are focusing here on someone generally acknowledged to have been one of the greatest revolutionary theorists and organizers in human history: Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, whose intimates knew him affectionately as "Ilyich," but whom the world knew by his underground pseudonym — Lenin. He was the leader of the Bolshevik wing of the Russian socialist movement, and this revolutionary socialist wing later became the Russian Communist Party after coming to power in the 1917 workers and peasants revolution.

For millions Lenin was seen as a liberator. Appropriated after his death by bureaucrats and functionaries in order to legitimate their tyranny in countries labeled "Communist," he was at the same time denounced for being a wicked and cruel fanatic by defenders of power and privilege in capitalist countries — and with Communism's collapse at the close of the Cold War it is their powerful voices that have achieved global domination. But the ideas of Lenin, if properly

utilized, can be vital resources for challenging the exploitation of humanity and degradation of our planet.

There are Marxist-influenced democratic socialists who would argue that "whoever wants to reach socialism by any other path than that of political democracy will inevitably arrive at conclusions that are absurd and reactionary both in the economic and political sense." In fact, these are the words of Lenin himself. Many critics of Lenin have pointed to his repressive policies of 1918-1922, when the early Soviet republic was engulfed and overwhelmed by multiple crises, accusing him of being the architect of the Stalinist totalitarianism of later decades. Much of my recent book *Marx, Lenin, and the Revolutionary Experience* (Routledge 2006) is devoted to disproving this grotesque distortion. Contrary to the claims of his detractors, Lenin's writings reveal a commitment to freedom and democracy that runs through his political thought from beginning to end. They also reveal an incredibly coherent analytical, strategic, and tactical orientation that has relevance for our own age of "globalization."[1]

In my remarks today I would like to do three things. First, I want to touch briefly on what I think are essentials of Lenin's thought. Second, I want to touch on a couple of major problems that have cropped up in efforts to build organizations aspiring to be Leninist. Third, I want to talk about the *necessity* of building such an organization.

Essentials of Lenin's Thought

As we can see from some of his earliest writings, Lenin's starting-point is a belief in the *necessary interconnection* of socialist ideas with the working class and labor movement. The working class cannot adequately defend its actual interests and overcome its oppression, in his view, without embracing the goal of socialism — an economic system in which the economy is socially owned and democratically controlled in order to meet the needs of all people. Inseparable from this is a basic understanding of *the working class as it is*, which involves a grasp of the diversity and unevenness of working-class experience and consciousness.

This calls for the development of a practical revolutionary approach seeking to connect, in serious ways, with the various sectors and layers of the working class. It involves the understanding that different approaches and goals are required to reach and engage one or another worker, or group or sector or layer of workers. This means thoughtfully utilizing various forms of educational and agitational literature, and developing different kinds of speeches and discussions, in order to connect the varieties of working-class experience, and, most important, to help initiate or support various kinds of practical struggles. The more "advanced" or vanguard layers of the working class must be rallied not to narrow and limited goals (in the spirit of "economism" and "pure and simple trade unionism"), but to an expansive sense of solidarity and common cause which has the potential for drawing the class as a whole into the struggle for its collective interests.

This fundamental orientation is the basis for most of what Lenin has to say. And as I was preparing the selection of Lenin's writings on revolution, democracy, and socialism that Pluto

Press is about to publish, (*Revolution, Democracy, Socialism*) I was struck once again by the intellectual and practical seriousness (the lack of dogmatism or sectarianism) in the way Lenin utilized Marxist theory.

This came through in many different ways — such as his understanding of the necessity for socialist and working-class support for struggles of all who suffer oppression, and in his way of integrating reform struggles with revolutionary strategy. We see it in his insistence on the necessity of working-class political independence, and on the need for working-class supremacy (or hegemony) if democratic and reform struggles are to triumph. It came through in his approach to social alliances (such as the worker-peasant alliance) as a key aspect of the revolutionary struggle, and also in his development of the united front tactic, in which diverse political forces can work together for common goals, without revolutionary organizations undermining their ability to pose effective alternatives to the capitalist status quo.

We can see it in his profound analyses of capitalist development, and of imperialism and of nationalism. It shines forth in his vibrantly revolutionary internationalist orientation that embraces the laborers and oppressed peoples of the entire world. We see it and learn from it in his remarkable understanding of the manner in which democratic struggles flow into socialist revolution. It certainly came through in his analysis of the nature of the state in history and class society, and in his conceptualization of triumphant working-class struggles generating a deepening and expanding democracy that would ultimately cause the state to wither away. Interwoven with the analyses and theorizations about the oppressions of *today*, and about a possible *future* of the free and the equal, we find a tough-minded practical orientation of struggle involving strategy, tactics, education, slogans, and — of course — *organization*.[2]

And precisely *here* — James P. Cannon once argued — was "the greatest contribution to the arsenal of Marxism since the death of Engels in 1895." That was the development of Lenin's Bolshevik organization as a revolutionary vanguard party which (in Cannon's words) "stands out as the prototype of what a democratic and centralized leadership of the workers, true to Marxist principles and applying them with courage and skill, can be and do."[3]

Elsewhere I have summarized Lenin's conception of organization in this way:

> "It is … a serious "organization of real revolutionaries," a "body of comrades in which complete, mutual confidence prevails" and in which all "have a lively sense of their responsibility." For Lenin, the preconditions for this phenomenon are a commitment to a revolutionary Marxist political program and — flowing from that — an effectively, centrally organized party that encourages critical thinking and local initiative; the integration of such thinking and experience into a partywide process of development; and, inseparable from all of this, a deeply ingrained democratic sensibility that manifests itself even when unusual conditions preclude the formal observance of democratic procedures. A democratically centralized organization based on a revolutionary program — this was … the essence of the Leninist conception of organization."[4]

Generations of revolutionary activists, in regions throughout the world, have found much of value in all this. Coming out of such a quintessentially American radical formation as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), Jim Cannon later recalled the powerful impact of "the ideas of the Russian Bolsheviks" among U.S. left-wing activists in the wake of World War I and the 1917 Revolution. He cited IWW leader "Big Bill" Haywood, who commented in an interview with Max Eastman that the Leninist party was consistent with key insights of American radicalism:

> "You remember I used to say that all we needed was fifty thousand real IWW's, and then about a million members to back them up? Well, isn't that a similar idea? At least I always realized that the essential thing was to have an organization of those who know."[5]

There have been, since the Russian Revolution of 1917, many efforts — inspired by Lenin's ideas and example — to create such revolutionary organizations of "those who know." Some of these efforts have given us inspiring pages in the history of the labor movements and working-class struggles in various countries, although many have also been undermined and fatally compromised by the later impact of Stalinism in the world Communist movement. Parties organized according to the revolutionary ideas of Lenin are qualitatively different from those organized according to the authoritarian forgery of Leninism developed under the Stalin dictatorship.

But even anti-Stalinist versions of Leninism often amount to what Tariq Ali once called "toy Bolshevik parties." They have often shown themselves to be quite different from, and inferior to, the revolutionary-democratic Bolsheviks of 1917. That's certainly been the case in the United States during my lifetime. I think there are two problems that help make this so. Both have to do with a failure to connect socialism with the actual working class.

The Problem of Texts and Contexts

First of all, there is a profound difference between "the Leninism of Lenin" and the immediate possibilities that we face in a context that is, in some ways, qualitatively different from his. To transpose the texts that come from Lenin and his time into our very different reality can lead to serious political confusion.

Lenin's Bolsheviks came into being within a very specific context. They were part of a broad global working-class formation, part of a developing labor movement, and part of an evolving labor-radical subculture. To try to duplicate Lenin's party today, outside of such a context, will create something that cannot function as the Bolsheviks functioned in Russia, nor can it function in the way the early U.S. Communists functioned in the 1920s or in the 1930s.

The existence of a class-conscious layer of the working class is a necessary precondition for creating a genuinely revolutionary party. *Workers' class consciousness*— that involves more than whatever notions happen to be in the minds of various members of the working class at any

particular moment. It involves an understanding of the insight that was contained in the preamble of the American Federation of Labor from 1886 to 1955:

> "A struggle is going on in all the nations of the civilized world, between the oppressors and the oppressed of all countries, a struggle between the capitalist and the laborer, which grows in intensity from year to year, and will work disastrous results to the toiling millions, if they are not combined for mutual protection and benefit."[6]

Not all workers have absorbed this insight into their consciousness, but those who have done so can be said to have at least an elementary class consciousness.

Such consciousness does not exist automatically in one's brain simply because we happen to sell our labor-power (our ability to work) for wages or a salary. But in the United States, from the period spanning the end of the Civil War in 1865 down through the Depression decade of the 1930s, a vibrant working-class subculture *had* developed throughout much of the United States. Often this "subculture" was more like a network of subcultures having very distinctive ethnic attributes, but these different ethnic currents were at various times connected by left-wing political structures (such as the old Knights of Labor, Socialist Party, IWW, Communist Party, etc.) and also, to an extent, by trade union frameworks. Within this context flourished the class-consciousness that is essential to the creation of a revolutionary party.

Those who founded the Trotskyist movement in the United States (which sought to build a revolutionary Marxist party — the Socialist Workers Party, the SWP) were a product of this radical workers' subculture. And they sought to make their own revolutionary contributions to it, and to help it become a revolutionary socialist force capable of transforming society.[7]

After 1945, there was a dramatic break in the continuity of this labor-radical tradition due to the realities that resulted from the Second World War, and the transformation of the social, economic, political, and cultural realities in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s. Essential specifics of workers' occupations and workday experience underwent fundamental changes. The organizations associated with the labor movement were similarly transformed — impacted by a complex combination of assaults, co-optations, corruptions, and erosions. The communities, culture, and consciousness of the working class became so different from the mid-1940s to the 1960s that only faded shreds of the old labor-radical subculture remained.[8]

It is not the case that the working class was eliminated. The working class is bigger than ever. But there has been a combined decomposition and recomposition of the working class, and the old labor-radical subculture is long gone. It, too, needs to be recomposed, and within a very different reality than once existed.

Because of this, there was a significant disconnect between the actual working class and the organized Left (including the SWP) that sought to represent the best interests of that class. This had grave implications. Back in the 1950s, after decades of Leninist and Trotskyist experience in the United States, James P. Cannon commented:

> "The conscious socialists should act as a 'leaven' in the instinctive and spontaneous movement of the working class. … The leaven can help the dough to rise and eventually become a loaf of bread, but it can never be a loaf of bread itself. … Every tendency, direct or indirect, of a small revolutionary party to construct a world of its own, outside and apart from the real movement of the workers in the class struggle, is sectarian."[9]

The experience of many activists influenced by Lenin from the 1950s down to the present demonstrates that efforts to create Leninist parties all-too-often degenerate into the construction of sects, with well-meaning activists penned up in a world of their own, separate and apart from the working class.[10]

My generation of young 1960s and 1970s activists can hardly be said to have started out in a sectarian mode. We helped to fundamentally change the political, social, and cultural landscape of the United States. But we saw the real social struggles of our time as involving opposition to such things as racism and poverty and war and sexism, but definitely *not* as the central expression of an organized labor movement The unions had had become highly bureaucratized and relatively conservative, largely inclined to hold back from — or even oppose — the radicalization and social struggles of the time.

Little of this had changed when — as our experiences and growing awareness further radicalized us — many of us went in a Marxist direction. Although the writings of Lenin, Trotsky, and Cannon were avidly read, discussed, and internalized by young SWP activists such as myself, the context in which the revolutionary "teachers" from earlier decades had lived and the context in which the avid students of the 1960s lived were qualitatively different. The relationship of the new radicals to the rest of the working class, not to mention the culture and consciousness of both the actual proletariat and its would-be "vanguard" in the 1970s, were far different from what was true in the early 1900s or the 1930s.[11]

A failure to comprehend the meaning of this ruptured continuity contributed to the rise of a fatal disorientation that accelerated within the SWP as the 1970s flowed into the 1980s, culminating in fragmentation and implosion. This happened especially as we sought to — once again — fuse socialism with the working class. This did not come naturally to my generation, and many of us really didn't know how to do it (though we were afraid to admit that).[12]

This failure, however, more or less afflicted all Marxist-oriented organizations in the U.S. from the late 1970s through the late 1980s. Ironically, this occurred as influences from the 1960s radicalization permeated much of the U.S. population, and as negative impacts from the early manifestations of "globalization" created remarkable new openings for left-wing developments within the working class. At the same time, much of the basis for the organized power of the working class — in the highly-unionized industries — was wiped out with the so-called "de-industrialization" of the U.S. economy. The labor movement's ability to mount effective struggles went into sharp decline.

The Problem of Fusing Socialism with the Workers' Movement

Sometimes clarity can be achieved if we shift from our own context to consider the experiences of comrades elsewhere. There is a working-class South African "township" activist, a revolutionary who has been on the cutting edge of the global justice movement that has challenged the imperialist thrust of modern-day "globalization." His name is Trevor Ngwane, and he says this:

> "Some in the anti-globalization movement say that the working-class is finished, that the social movements or even 'civil society' itself are now the leading force for change. But if we're honest, some of these [so-called] social movements consist of nothing more than an office and a big grant from somewhere or other. They can call a workshop, pay people to attend, give them a nice meal and then write up a good report. They build nothing on the ground."

Ngwane finds the abstraction of "civil society" even more problematical, a class-jumbled hodge-podge "expanding to the business sector," mixed in with "NGOs [non-governmental organizations that deal with social issues] tendering for contracts for private government services."[13]

Ngwane embraces aspects of the global justice movement (such as the World Social Forum) that involve dialogue, information-sharing, and coordinated efforts between activists like himself from various countries — but he stresses that "the working class … remains a key component of any alternative left strategy." A majority of workers are not in trade unions, and problems faced by workers extend well beyond the workplace. This requires seeing the class struggle as something larger than union struggles. He adds that

> "the high level of unemployment is a real problem here. It does make workers more cautious. We need to organize both the employed and the unemployed, to overcome capital's divide-and-conquer tactics."

As a township activist, he emphasizes,

> "in the end we had to get down to the most basic questions: what are the problems facing people on the ground that unite us most? In Soweto, it's electricity. In another area, it is water. We've learned that you have to actually organize — to talk to people, door to door; to connect with the masses."

For Ngwane, however, this is necessarily linked with "the issue of political power," and ultimately "targeting state power." He concludes his discussion of local grassroots organizing with the comment that

> "you have to build with a vision. From Day One we argued that electricity cuts are the result of privatization. Privatization … reflects the demands of global capital… We cannot finally win this immediate struggle unless we win that greater one."

He then comes back to the essential point:

> "But still, connecting with what touches people on a daily basis, in a direct fashion, is the way to move history forward."[14]

The points that Ngwane makes are consistent with the points made by Lenin's companion Nadezhda Krupskaya many years before, when she described how some ultra-left Bolshevik comrades asserted that the revolutionary goal precluded the struggle for "mere reforms." Such a view, she insisted, was "fallacious," because "it would mean giving up all practical work, standing aside from the masses instead of organizing them on real-life issues." Referring to the actual history of the Bolsheviks, she insisted on the very same connections we find in the comments of Ngwane:

> "The Bolsheviks showed themselves capable of making good use of every legal possibility, of forging ahead and rallying the masses behind them under the most adverse conditions. Step by step, beginning with the campaign for tea service and ventilation, they had led the masses up to the national armed insurrection."

The blend of the practical and the principled, the interplay of the real struggles of the workers and oppressed with the revolutionary goal are here at the heart of Bolshevism:

> "The ability to adjust oneself to the most adverse [non-revolutionary] conditions and at the same time to stand out and maintain one's high-principled positions — such were the traditions of Leninism."[15]

There is another point that was made some years ago by my mentor and comrade George Breitman of the Socialist Workers Party. In examining the mass radicalization that swept the United States during the 1960s and 1970s, Breitman identified the mighty social movements and the early beginnings of what some have labeled "identity politics" in this illuminating manner: "It is idiotic and insulting to think that the worker responds only to economic issues. He can be radicalized in various ways, over various issues, and he is." Breitman developed this point:

> "The radicalization of the worker can begin off the job as well as on. It can begin from the fact that the worker is a woman as well as a man; that the worker is Black or Chicano or a member of some other oppressed minority as well as white; that the worker is a father or mother whose son can be drafted; that the worker is young as well as middle-aged or about to retire. If we grasp the fact that the working class is stratified and divided in many ways — the capitalists prefer it that way — then we will be better able to understand how the radicalization will develop among workers and how to intervene more effectively. Those who haven't already learned important lessons from the radicalization of oppressed minorities, youth and women had better hurry up and learn them, because most of the people involved in these radicalizations are workers or come from working-class families."[16]

This perception was entirely consistent with the perspectives of Lenin, of course, who told us that a revolutionary socialist's ideal should be "the tribune of the people, who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what

stratum or class of people it affects; who … is able to take advantage of every event, however small, in order to set forth before all his socialist convictions and democratic demands, in order to clarify for all and everyone the world-historic significance of the struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat."[17]

It seems to me that it is not a simple thing to meet this challenge of fusing socialism with the struggles, the movements, and the consciousness of the working class. I think a problem for many revolutionary socialists has been a trend toward sectarianism and what could be called "propagandism." Their focus is discussing socialism and Marxist ideas in their own organizational universe, and from that universe sending out revolutionary socialist messages to the workers on planet Earth.

I think a problem for other revolutionaries has been a trend toward what Lenin criticized as "economism" — immersing themselves in the immediate struggles of one or another sector of the working class in a way that avoids efforts to spread socialist consciousness, in hopes that this consciousness will somehow spontaneously crystallize in workers' minds through "pure and simple" economic struggles for higher wages or better conditions or more democratic unions (or other reform efforts).

It is not a simple thing for revolutionaries to find the right balance between, or the right blend of, talking about revolutionary theory and being involved in actual day-to-day workers' struggles.

In the Socialist Workers Party of the late 1970s, large numbers of us went into the factories, shipyards, mines, garment shops, and other industrial workplaces of this country with the explicit intention to — as we put it — "talk socialism to workers." I think that by the early 1980s, for the most part, we were getting it wrong. Despite the sometimes incredibly good work of individual comrades, the SWP as a whole tended to talk socialism *at* workers. Too many of us didn't really *listen* to the people around us, didn't really engage with their actual lives and struggles, and so we were incapable of making our socialist ideas relevant to their struggles and to their lives.[18]

But there are wonderful examples, including from our very own tradition of American Trotskyism, of those who got it right. Back in the 1930s, in his classic book *American City*, reporter Charles Rumford Walker described the role of Vincent Raymond Dunne in organizing the 1934 Minneapolis teamsters strike, one of the turning-points in the history of the U.S. labor movement. "Probably four or five hundred workers in Minneapolis knew 'Ray' personally," according to Walker.

> "They formed their own opinions — that he was honest, intelligent, and selfless, and a damn good organizer for the truck drivers' union to have. They had always known him to be a Red; that was no news."

Dunne explained what he was doing in this way:

> *"Our policy was to organize and build strong unions so workers could have something to say about their own lives and assist in changing the present order into a socialist society."[19]*

I think that's the kind of involvement in the life and struggles of the working class, and the kind of balance, that a revolutionary socialist organization should strive for.

The Need to Share Knowledge and Skills to Change the World

I want to conclude with some additional thoughts on the *need* for the revolutionary organization that — so far — we do not have, and on the possibilities of developing it. I want to do this first by summarizing some of the points I have already made, and then reach for a new thought.

Most people in our country are oppressed, exploited, damaged, and made indignant — in many different ways — by the capitalist system. In order to overcome such things, they would greatly benefit from the contributions developed by previous generations of revolutionaries. In most cases, these are things of which they have no knowledge.

How will the experiences and invaluable lessons, the skills and the knowledge, of our revolutionary brothers and sisters of previous generations (and of *our* generation) be passed on to the rest of the working class today and tomorrow?

This will not happen automatically. It is certainly not in the interest of those forces that dominate the informational and educational and cultural media and institutions of our society to ensure that this knowledge is communicated to people — especially if those people are part of the diverse working-class majority.

The powerful elites secure their amazing privileges and vast wealth through their control and exploitation of the world's laboring majorities. They prefer that the history of revolution and protest be consigned to what George Orwell called "the memory hole," or to glorifications that distort everything, or to commemorative postage stamps. Everything emanating from the institutions of the *status quo* (with relatively few subversive exceptions) encourages people to do other things than engage with, emulate, and advance the efforts of past revolutionaries.

Genuine revolutionary and class-struggle knowledge, and the awareness of the people and the struggles through which such knowledge was accumulated, will surely evaporate unless some people draw together to preserve such things, and use them, and pass them on.

The skills and knowledge necessary to build effective protests, to advance life-giving reform efforts, and to create revolutionary possibilities, will only be passed on through the work of those who are dedicated to helping change the world — to challenge, undermine, push back, and overturn the powerful elites, to open the way for rule by the people, for the free development of each and all, in harmony with the life-nurturing environment of our planet.

But to be effective in doing this — now as before — it is necessary for at least a significant number of such conscious revolutionaries to concentrate and coordinate their efforts, to work together in a revolutionary socialist organization that is committed to the preservation,

utilization, and spread throughout the working class of the perspectives, the knowledge, and the skills associated with the traditions of revolutionary Marxism. Without organization, their efforts will be too diffuse, too amateur, too isolated.

This runs into the problem already identified: Attempts by small numbers of people to construct a revolutionary party — even the so-called "nucleus of the revolutionary party" — outside the context of a broad labor-radical subculture generally tends to result in the construction of a *political sect*. The members of such a political sect by definition cut themselves off from the possibility, the actual work, of helping to *create* a broad labor-radical subculture capable of sustaining a revolutionary class-consciousness and class-struggle. A critic of my recent book *Marx, Lenin, and the Revolutionary Experience* has put it this way:

> "A mass labour movement underpinned the emergence of the Bolsheviks as a mass party in the years 1912-17 in Russia and formed the world in which US Communism operated in the 1930s. Today all this is gone, argues Le Blanc, therefore Leninism must be a fish out of water, doomed to shrivel into marginal sects that fruitlessly try to impose models from classical Marxism without recognizing that the context that allowed it to emerge as a serious force has changed."[20]

As the young bad guy says near the end of the film *Cold Mountain*: "That's what they call a conundrum!"

It seems to me that the puzzle has a solution. The high risk, or even general tendency, of sectarianism is not the same as an "iron law" of sectarianism. It is possible and necessary for "those who know" something of the ideas and skills associated with the revolutionary Left to interact with those who don't. But we have to do this in a systematically *interactive* way. We have to be able to learn from people, to *listen* to them, in order to be able to share knowledge with them.

Only in this way can left-wing knowledge and skills become relevant to their lives (to the lives of all who are engaged in this double-sided teaching process). Only in this way can socialism begin, once more, to permeate broader sectors of the working class, and become a greater force among its activist layers in the labor movement and the other social movements.

That is the challenge for us today and tomorrow.

Footnotes

[1] V. I. Lenin, "Two Tactics of Social-Democracy in the Democratic Revolution," *Collected Works*, vol. 9 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1973), 29, and Paul Le Blanc, *Marx, Lenin, and the Revolutionary Experience: Studies of Communism and Radicalism in the Age of Globalization*, (New York: Routledge, 2006), 101-151. On democratic continuities, see Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *Revolution, Democracy, and Socialism, Selected Writings*, edited by Paul Le Blanc (London: Pluto Press, 2008, forthcoming). The policies of 1918-1922 reflect not the fundamental orientation championed by Lenin for over twenty years, discussed here, but rather the overwhelming crisis and extreme violence generated by international and domestic enemies in that period. See Moshe Lewin, *The Soviet*

Century (London: Verso, 2005) and Arno J. Mayer, *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

[2] One friend commented on this section that I am here "talking about the Transitional Program without mentioning it both in general and Trotsky's specific writings." In fact, I was not seeking (tacitly or otherwise) to map out Trotsky's "transitional program" conception – but my friend is, in a sense, right: in this 1938 document Trotsky was consciously attempting to summarize the Bolshevik-Leninist perspective. See Leon Trotsky, *The Transitional Program for Socialist Revolution* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1977), Third Edition, especially the useful introductory essays by Joseph Hansen and George Novack.

[3] Quoted in Paul Le Blanc, *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1993), 1-2.

[4] Ibid., 53-54.

[5] James P. Cannon, *The First Ten Years of American Communism* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1962), 304, 317-318. An outstanding work of recent scholarship on this reality can be found in Bryan Palmer's invaluable *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

[6] Quoted in Paul Le Blanc, *A Short History of the U.S. Working Class, From Colonial Times to the Twenty-first Century* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1999), 48.

[7] There is considerable evidence of the "labor-radical sub-culture" referred to here, one of the earliest being Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling, *The Working-Class Movement in America* (London: Swan Sonnenschein and Co., 1891), reprinted with a substantial introduction by me providing much additional documentation (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2000). The analysis presented here was first put forward in my introductory essay to Paul Le Blanc, "Leninism in the United States and the Decline of the Socialist Workers Party," ed., *In Defense of American Trotskyism: Revolutionary Principles and Working-Class Democracy* (New York: Fourth Internationalist Tendency, 1992), reproduced in George Breitman, Paul Le Blanc, and Alan Wald, *Trotskyism in the United States: Historical Essays and Reconsiderations* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1996). It can be found on-line, along with a number of other items of relevance, at www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/fit.htm.

[8] A variety of informative and stimulating works – some conflicting with each other on one or another salient point – provide information and insights on what is described here: Stanley Aronowitz, *False Promises: The Shaping of American Working-Class Consciousness*, revised edition (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992); James Boggs, *American Revolution: Pages From a Negro Worker's Notebook* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1963); Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2003); Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Post-War America* (New York: Vintage, 2003); Mike Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the U.S. Working Class*, 2nd edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000); David M. Gordon, Richard Edwards, and Michael Reich, *Segmented Work, Divided Workers: The Historical Transformation of Labor in the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Paul Le Blanc and Thomas Barrett, eds., *Revolutionary Labor Socialist: The Life, Ideas, and Comrades of Frank Lovell* (New York: Smyrna Press, 2000); John C. Leggett, *Race, Class and Political Consciousness: Working-Class Consciousness in Detroit* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968); George Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight: Labor and Culture in the 1940s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Kim Moody, *An Injury to All: The Decline of American Unionism* (London: Verso, 1988).

[9] James P. Cannon, "Engels and Lenin on the Party" [Letter to V. R. Dunne, January 14, 1955], *Bulletin in Defense of Marxism*, no. 19, June 1985, 29-30.

[10] Some of this draws from Le Blanc, *Marx, Lenin, and the Revolutionary Experience*, 150-151, and Le Blanc, *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party*, 344, 348-349.

[11] Positive contributions of the "new left" are well recorded in Van Gosse, *Rethinking the New Left, An Interpretive History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). Further documentation on this can be found in Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines, eds., *"Takin' It to the Streets": A Sixties Reader*, Second Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). A useful portrait of the SWP up through the early 1970s is offered in Barry Sheppard's *The Party, A Political Memoir, The Socialist Workers Party 1960-1988, Volume 1: The Sixties* (Australia: Resistance Books, 2005; distributed in the U.S. by Haymarket Books). An excellent chronicle of an array of Maoist groups into which many young 1960s activists streamed is offered in Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao and Che* (London: Verso, 2002). A reflective review-essay of these last three titles can be found in Monthly Review's MRzine – http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/leblanc120106.html.

[12] An important contribution to this analysis comes from the perceptions of Frank Lovell, former trade union director of the SWP, which can be found in the above-cited *Revolutionary Labor Socialist: The Life, Ideas, and Comrades of Frank Lovell* and also in his essay "The Meaning of the Struggle Inside the Socialist Workers Party," in Sarah Lovell, ed*., In Defense of American Trotskyism: The Struggle Inside the Socialist Workers Party 1979-1983* (New York: Fourth Internationalist Tendency, 1992) – see www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/fit.htm.

[13] Trevor Ngwane, "Sparks in the Township," in Tom Mertes, ed., *A Movement of Movements: Is Another World Really Possible?* (London: Verso, 2004), 132-133.

[14] Ibid., 133, 134. On the World Social Forum, see the volume containing Ngwane's comments, plus José Corrêa Leite, *The World Social Forum: Strategies of Resistance*(Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005).

[15] N. K. Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin* (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 167.

[16] George Breitman, "The Current Radicalization Compared with Those of the Past," in Jack Barnes, George Breitman, Derrick Morrson, Barry Sheppard, Mary-Alice Waters *Towards an American Socialist Revolution, A Strategy for the 1970s* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 101. Also see Anthony Marcus, ed., *Malcolm X and the Third American Revolution: Selected Writings of George Breitman* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2005).

[17] The quote is from *What Is To Be Done?* – see Le Blanc, *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party*, 67; Lenin, *Selected Works*, vol. I (New York: International Publishers, 1967), 164.

[18] One comrade from this period argues, persuasively, that SWP members were tending to "get it right" in the mid-to-late 1970s, with involvement in the important Steelworkers Fightback campaign of Ed Sadlowski, and also in the community control struggles in New York's Lower Eastside.

[19] Walker and Dunne quoted in Le Blanc, *A Short History of the U.S. Working Class*, 85. See Charles Rumford Walker, *American City: A Rank and File History of Minneapolis*(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), and the series by Farrell Dobbs – *Teamster Rebellion, Teamster Power, Teamster Politics* and *Teamster Bureaucracy* (New York: Monad/Pathfinder, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977) – the Dunne quote can be found on page 227 of this final volume.

[20] Mark Thomas, "Leninism With Reservations," *International Socialism*, No. 114 (April 2007) – online at http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?s=contents&issue=114.

Socialist Voice #254, June 8, 2008

Revolutionary Organization Today: Part Two

An exchange between John Riddell and Paul Le Blanc

- *Part One of this special feature contains Paul Le Blanc's talk "Lenin and the Revolutionary Party Today."*
- *Part Two is an exchange of emails between John Riddell and Paul Le Blanc about that article.*
- *We encourage feedback*

Comment by John Riddell

Dear Paul,

Thank you for sending me your article "Lenin and the Revolutionary Party Today." Reading it was a liberating experience. It is so good to hear a statement of the case for building a revolutionary organization that is decidedly anti-sectarian.

I'd also like to raise a few points where your argument could, in my opinion, be taken further.

1. You talk of the lack of a broad labor-radical subculture. However, if I may take Toronto as an example, there is such a subculture. In terms of activism, it includes thousands of people. That's not a mass base; it is a lot fewer now than during some periods in the last half-century, but in some ways this subculture is more advanced. It is now largely free of the influence of Stalinism, which was so dominant in the past, and Social Democracy is much less influential. It is not marked by the ultraleftism so prominent in the sixties; its political activities are broadly speaking on the mark. Also, this subculture has links to a broader constituency: for example, the 50-odd Islamic anti-Imperialists whom we meet fairly frequently can on occasion mobilize thousands, and so on in other sectors.

Moreover, this subculture is not limited geographically. It extends out internationally into several continents, and all that tumult of world class struggle gets drawn into our little city.

In my experience, today's revolutionary socialist groups have a conflictual relationship with this subculture. Each revolutionary group identifies its own organization with the historic interest of the working class and prioritizes its organizational purposes over the needs of the broader movement. This is widely perceived by activists and strongly resented. In addition, most revolutionary groups prioritize an orientation to the "masses" as against collaboration with activists.

2. You say that attempts to build a "nucleus of the revolutionary party" turn in a sectarian direction because of the lack of a context of a radical subculture. Yes, but there is more to it than that. The revolutionary groups attempt to follow a fixed model of Bolshevik organization,

regardless of their stage of development. This inflexibility in organizational conceptions is actually the opposite of the Bolshevik approach.

In addition, each revolutionary group today has a body of doctrine going back a century, which provides a predetermined answer to every major question, plus an apostolic succession of guiding theorists whose views cannot be challenged. The group's politics are fixed and inflexible. The Bolsheviks, by contrast, had less fixed doctrine. In Lenin's time, there were repeated sharp shifts in their politics in reaction to changed conditions and the lessons of experience.

3. The Bolshevik organizational model implemented by revolutionary groups today actually differs radically from the Bolsheviks in decisive ways, for example:

- The Bolsheviks encompassed a broad spectrum of revolutionary fighters; today's revolutionary group embraces only one ideological current.
- The Bolsheviks were political heterogeneous; today's revolutionary group can encompass only one font of political authority. An enduring difference between two central leaders usually leads to a split.
- The Bolsheviks held their discussions in public, before the working class; today's revolutionary group discusses in private.
- The discipline of the Bolsheviks was directed primarily against the ruling class; the discipline of today's revolutionary groups is directed primarily against each other.
- And so on.

4. In the classic era of Trotskyism, the workers' movement was cleanly subdivided into Stalinist, Social Democratic and Trotskyist currents, with some centrist sub-currents. As Trotsky said, the Fourth International was the only revolutionary current worthy of the name. Now, these divisions are much less clear. Movements like the Venezuelan Bolivarians cannot be neatly assigned to any category. The division of 1914-1920 into revolutionary and reformist currents has broken down and must be fought through again.

5. In this changed context, and with the collapse of organized Stalinism, it is not so clear what Trotskyism represents.

I judge Trotskyism on the basis of the broad range of groups acknowledging this theoretical heritage. What I say here should not be viewed as a criticism of any specific group.

Trotskyism is certainly not the only revolutionary current today. With regard to many Trotskyist currents, the revolutionary quality seems purely verbal: they do not relate to living revolutionary movements. Trotskyism today tends to underplay anti-imperialist struggles. Trotskyism tends to ignore the peasantry. Trotskyism is characterized by a sceptical attitude toward mass struggles in poor and dependent countries. None of this was true of the Trotskyism of my youth. Criticism has its uses, but the revolution will not be made by scepticism alone.

On the whole, Trotskyism seems to have lost much of its revolutionary edge in the last 30 years. It needs to be revitalized through cross-fertilization with other class-struggle currents.

6. Recently we have seen signs of a renewed vitality of Trotskyist currents in the United States. A conference is coming up next month in New York, which includes speakers from many Trotskyist currents. This could be a step along a road to revitalization. It is always positive when revolutionary socialists find a way to discuss together and collaborate together.

But my mind keeps returning to your comment about the revolutionary group's relationship to the broad labor-radical subculture. To say that this subculture doesn't exist seems like a cop-out. We have to relate to what is there. An insistence on the uniqueness of Trotskyism as a revolutionary current can become a barrier to this. And to relate to labour radicalism, we have to come to grips with a number of aspects in our heritage which – whatever their original justification – have now become signposts to sectarianism. Only in that way will be able, as you say, "to learn from people, to listen to people."

Thanks again for your stimulating comments.

John Riddell

Response by Paul Le Blanc

Dear John,

I want to emphasize how pleased I am to receive your comments and critical thoughts. I will respond to those point by point. I may also send you some posts that have been made to our pre-conference discussion-list that address some of the themes that arise in you remarks.

1. One fact that may not have been expressed clearly in what I have been writing is that I know the United States, and function in the United States, and my points regarding the lack of the labor-radical sub-culture that stretched at least from the Civil War to World War II is focused on the United States. I don't assume that what I describe in the U.S. is global. It seems to me that the opposite is true — though I suspect there may be some element of relevance in at least some other countries. I would love to come to Toronto (I was there only once, and fleetingly) and see more of Canada as well. I don't doubt at all what you say about the existence of some such sub-culture existing there, and I imagine there would be much for me to learn.

For that matter, I do think that there are elements for the recomposition of such a sub-culture in my own country. I believe a recomposition process is already underway, although it seems to me it has a ways to go before it crystallizes on a sufficiently mass scale and with sufficient clarity of consciousness within certain segments of the working class here.

You write:

> "Revolutionary socialist groups have a conflictual relationship with this subculture. Each revolutionary group identifies its own organization with the historic interest of the

> working class and prioritizes its organizational purposes over the needs of the broader movement. This is widely perceived and strongly resented. In addition, most revolutionary groups prioritize an orientation to the "masses" as against collaboration with activists."

That seems to me extremely problematical. Unfortunately, within the U.S. there is all too much of that as well. It seems to me that we might have different takes on certain details and specifics — I don't know — but what you describe in general terms seems consistent with my own point of view.

2. I think I agree with what you say when you write:

> "The revolutionary groups attempt to follow a fixed model of Bolshevik organization, regardless of their stage of development. This inflexibility in organizational conceptions is actually the opposite of the Bolshevik approach."

Of course, here we have to walk through specifics. It is certainly, unquestionably the case that the "Bolshevism" of the SWP was increasingly problematical, increasingly rigid and distorted, from 1972 through the 1980s. I can cite many specifics (and I have — particularly in my long essay of long ago entitled "Leninism in the United States and the Decline of the Socialist Workers Party," which can be found in the Fourth Internationalist Tendency section of the Encyclopedia of Trotskyism On-Line).

I also agree that the misuse of revolutionary theory as Handy Dandy Manual for Know-It-Alls, all-too-prevalent among many would-be revolutionaries, must be rejected. What we need is a revolutionary Marxism that is a method for critical-minded analysis and guide to action (not abstention) that must be undergoing constant utilization, enrichment, refinement, modification, and development. It seems to me that the notion that Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky were people who may have been wrong about one thing or another (and MUST have been wrong about at least SOME things) is an essential element to any socialism that claims to be "scientific." It does seem to me that these amazing comrades (and I would add others to the pantheon — especially Rosa Luxemburg, also Gramsci, arguably some others) gave us much that is fundamentally correct, but the only way to determine what is correct and what is not is to use it and evaluate it, in the process adding to the valuable elements that are already there.

Depending on how you define your terms, I think it may be a bit of an overstatement to say that "the Bolsheviks did not have much fixed doctrine," but it is precisely because some of their key leaders — Lenin most of all — used Marxism as a truly revolutionary approach (a la Marx) that, as you say, "there were repeated sharp shifts in their politics in reaction to changed conditions and the lessons of experience."

3. You write: "The Bolshevik organizational model implemented by revolutionary groups today actually differs radically from the Bolsheviks in decisive ways." There may be some revolutionary groups that are better than this, but much of what you say is all-too-true. I pretty much like the points you make. It would be worth discussing them in greater detail, with more

reference to specifics, in order to get the clarity that I imagine we would both be satisfied with. But the thrust of what you say is absolutely correct.

4. I continue to self-identify as a Marxist, a Leninist, and a Trotskyist. But to my mind, this needs to be understood in a new way, because the realities you point to — the divisions are much less clear than in 1938, there are and have been new revolutionary currents that do not fit into the old categories, "the division of 1914-1920 into revolutionary and reformist currents has broken down and must be fought through again" — are, in fact, realities.

5. You write: "In this changed context, and with the collapse of organized Stalinism, it is not so clear what Trotskyism represents."

The usual thing I was taught in our movement in response to this question (what is Trotskyism?) was that Trotskyism represents revolutionary Marxism, the standpoint of Bolshevik-Leninism, extended into the 1920s, '30s and '40s, and beyond. What I have said about Lenin's orientation goes for that of Trotsky. In addition to what Lenin said and wrote, it especially involves an analysis of fascism, an analysis of Stalinism and of the USSR's bureaucratic degeneration, and the theory of permanent revolution (understood intelligently, not stupidly — see my article on uneven and combined development in *International Viewpoint* or my writings in the 1980s on the Nicaraguan Revolution). For me, a Trotskyism that Trotsky would relate to today would be consistent with all that can be found above.

I do not know if your criticism of "Trotskyism today" is applicable to all of the groups that present themselves as Trotskyist, but I believe that it is applicable to some, and I know that such "Trotskyism" is not the same as Trotsky's actual perspectives — and it is certainly alien to my own views. I do believe that "the mainstream Fourth International is different," though the weakness of the FI makes it difficult sometimes to identify some of the views of its "mainstream" (looking through International Viewpoint may be helpful in that respect).

I would not disagree with the statement that "Trotskyism seems to have lost much of its revolutionary edge in the last 30 years. It needs to be revitalized through cross-fertilization with other class-struggle currents." In my most recent book (Marx, Lenin, and the Revolutionary Experience) I reached for some of that, and the same is true in my interview in the MRzine a couple of years ago — http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/yates280806.html.

6. I believe the Trotsky Legacy Conference coming up at Fordham University in New York City, July 25-27, will be a place for important discussions having to do with the kinds of things we are discussing here. My hope is that it will be, as you say, "an initial step along the road to revitalization."

This relates to the final point you make about the labor-radical sub-culture. You write: "To say that this subculture doesn't exist seems like a cop-out." It can be a cop-out if we use such a notion to do just that — cop out. We need to define what is in order to figure out what to do — or, as you put it, "We have to relate to what is there." That is absolutely true. You say: "An

insistence on the uniqueness of Trotskyism as a revolutionary current can become a barrier to this." I agree with that. We can't allow it to happen.

You assert that "to relate to labour radicalism, we have to come to grips with a number of aspects in our heritage which — whatever their original justification — have now become signposts to sectarianism." I agree.

I believe there are essential elements from Marx, Luxemburg, Lenin, Trotsky, and others from the revolutionary Marxist tradition that are crucial for a victory of the workers and the oppressed worldwide. To pretend to be the Keepers of Revolutionary Truth is inconsistent with passing on the truths that these comrades helped to discover.

Those of us who have a sense of those genuinely revolutionary insights and perspectives have a responsibility to share them in ways that make sense and are useful to those engaged in struggles of today and tomorrow.

To be able to do this requires a certain openness that is consistent with the method of Marx, Lenin, and the rest. We have to be able "to learn from people, to listen to people," if we have any hope of being able — and the same time — to share the genuine revolutionary Marxism that will be needed for the triumph of socialism.

That's what I think, anyway.

Warm regards,

Paul Le Blanc

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The Harper 'Apology' — Saying 'Sorry' with a Forked Tongue

By Mike Krebs

On June 11, 2008, Stephen Harper, prime minister of Canada and leader of the Conservative Party, issued an "apology" for the residential school system that over 150,000 Indigenous children were forced through. The hype before and after the statement was enormous, with extensive coverage in all major media.

This event had a strong emotional and psychological impact on Indigenous survivors of residential schools all across Canada, who suffered attempted forced assimilation as well as countless acts of violence, rape, and abuse. Descendents of those subjected to this system were equally affected. People packed into community halls and similar venues on June 11 for what was bound to be an emotionally triggering day for survivors, regardless of their view towards the meaning of the "apology." Some survivors reportedly felt that the statement was a step forward, while many were highly critical.

In trying to understand the responses of Indigenous people across Canada to this "apology," it is first important to address what it did not do. It must be judged in terms of the ability of Indigenous people to move forward in the process of true healing, not just from the effects of the residential school system, but from the entire process of Canadian colonialism. In this framework, the deficiencies of the "apology" are much greater than any positive impact it could have.

A crime of genocide

> "I want to get rid of the Indian problem. I do not think as a matter of fact, that the country ought to continuously protect a class of people who are able to stand alone… Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department, that is the whole object of this Bill." —Duncan Campbell Scott, head of the Department of Indian Affairs and founder of the residential school system, 1920
>
> "I don't want to hear it. You know, you might as well send the janitor up to apologize…if it's just empty words or a nicely written text." — Michael Cachagee, survivor of Shingwauk Indian Residential School[1]

If there is one thing that Mr. Harper's "apology" provided that could be considered groundbreaking or new, it's the idea that there can be crimes without criminals.

You would think offering an "apology" means taking some sort of accountability for the residential school system. But Harper's statement acknowledges that what happened is a

"mistake" without dealing with it as a crime, and without any sense of any individual accountability for it. It views the residential school system as only a mistake.

No discussion of the residential school system can be meaningful without acknowledging that this was an act of genocide. For those who value the importance of international law and the United Nations convention of genocide, let's look at the UN definition itself as outlined in the "Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, adopted in 1948":

> "Article 2. In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:
>
> (a) Killing members of the group;
>
> (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
>
> (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
>
> (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
>
> (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group."

Arguably all five of these criteria apply to the residential school system and other aspects of the Canadian government's colonization of Indigenous people. And there can be no argument that parts (b) and (e) apply, as a number of Indigenous writers have pointed out.[2] It is important to note that guilt for this crime lies not only with the individuals who committed specific crimes against Indigenous people (i.e. sexual assault, physical violence, forced removal), but also with those who enacted the entire policy.

So even though Harper apologized for the residential schools as a "system," it doesn't absolve individuals who participated in the numerous criminal acts they committed. Yet, that is what Harper's statement attempts to do by apologizing on behalf of "all Canadians," deceptively hiding behind the false logic that "nobody is guilty if everyone is."

This is similar to some of the ideas discussed by Cherokee activist and academic Andrea Smith in *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*. Smith uses Carol Adam's concept of the "absent referent" in exploring various aspects of sexual violence against Indigenous women, as well as how this concept recurs throughout Western society, mythology, and history. One example is that of the "battered" woman, which makes women "the inherent victims of battering. The batterer is rendered invisible and thus the absent referent".[3]

A similar tool of deception is at work in not only the "apology", but the entire approach of the Canadian government in its "solutions" to the residential school issue. Aside from notorious cases like that of the Archbishop Hubert O'Connor,[4] and others who can be easily tarred as "bad people who did bad things," in Harper's statement the perpetrator of the crimes against residential school survivors has no tangible face, almost no concrete existence.

Putting residential schools in historical context

A second great weakness of the "apology," related to the first, is that it attempts to separate the residential schools from the entire colonial project of the Canadian state. This further obscures a true understanding of why this crime was committed and a more real understanding than simply saying "we were wrong."

The key role of the residential school system in the overall process of Canadian colonialism cannot be overestimated. The theft of Indigenous lands and resources, along with the destruction of Indigenous cultures and societies, were met with resistance. In many cases this resistance was well organized and proved difficult for the European settlers to quell, despite their supposedly more "advanced" weapons and military organization.

Rather than risking a resurgence of resistance in the various Indigenous communities that could result from allowing them to exist, the authorities adopted a policy of forced partial assimilation. Even if total destruction of Indigenous people could not be achieved, partial assimilation could weaken the resistance of Indigenous communities, while producing an underclass to perform menial wage labour in the Canadian economy.

This assimilation was partial in the sense that Indigenous people were not to be completely absorbed into the settler society as equals. Even to call these youth prisons "schools" distorts not only how these institutions functioned but what was actually being taught.

The residential school system had the effect of fostering complete self-hatred in most of those who went through it, building a collective psychology within Indigenous people that reproduced the colonizer's image of them. Indigenous people were forced to internalize a conception of themselves as being drunken, lazy, and stupid. Weakening Indigenous communities, cultures, and nations was the primary goal, with little in the way of "education" even in terms of Western conceptions of learning.

Challenging the Canadian state and the underlying settler project

These political implications of the residential school project continue today. It has had such a disastrous effect on the inter-personal relationships of Indigenous people that its wounds are overcome only with immense individual and collective struggle.

Generations of physical and sexual abuse, alcohol and drug addiction, continued child apprehension by organs of the Canadian state, alarming rates of suicide — these are only the more visible of the many problems Indigenous people have been forced to work through because of the residential school experience. As a result, the ability of Indigenous communities to effectively organize against the continued theft of lands and resources is directly weakened.

Yet this resistance continues, and should be understood as one of the main factors influencing the decision of the Canadian government to issue this "apology." Right now there are numerous struggles by Indigenous people within Canada over land and resources. These struggles are intensifying in response to the Canadian capitalist economy's increased hunger for valuable

resources such as platinum, uranium, and oil in a time of increasing prices, scarcity, and volatility in energy markets.

These struggles of Indigenous people, be it Haudenosaunee, Cree, Innu, Anishininimowin, or Tahltan, just to list a few examples, are only in part over who the land in question "belongs" to in the Western sense of private property. When Indigenous people assert sovereignty over their lands, this also challenges the legitimacy of the entire Canadian nation state and the settler project that underpins it.

More importantly, it involves struggles for the assertion of a different conception of land and of Indigenous worldviews that see the well being of humans and the state of the land and all its living beings as inseparable. This means a respect for the earth and valuing life in a way totally alien from the "market value" these things may or may not have under capitalist relations.

These struggles over the land mark a departure from engaging with the Canadian political establishment on the terms it tries to set. Evidence of this can be seen in the consistent criminalization that goes on whenever Indigenous people make stands for their rights. Organizers like Shaun Brant, the KI 6, Robert Lovelace, and Wolverine are presented by the mainstream media, the police, and politicians as "criminals," while the actual political content and nature of their actions is hidden.

The "apology" of Harper, along with the entire "Truth and Reconciliation Commission" project, must in the end be understood in this context. For example, we are being asked to engage on the level of accepting whether the apology is "sincere" or not and whether the settlement money is "enough," and to welcome the "Truth and Reconciliation Commission" as a meaningful space in which to heal.

This is a direct attempt to reframe the direction of Indigenous struggles by looking for solutions, or at least dialogue, within the framework of the Canadian settler state as it exists today. Could there be a more fundamental attack on Indigenous sovereignty than this, given the direction in which many Indigenous struggles are heading all across Canada?

Mixed reactions to Harper's statement

The "apology" certainly had an impact on survivors of the residential school system, and this is completely understandable. Even a small acknowledgement of wrongdoing goes a long way, given how many years the Canadian government has refused to show accountability for its crimes. Indigenous people are subjected to a large amount of crazymaking around the ways they have been negatively impacted by the residential schools and other criminal acts. In fact this crazymaking is itself yet another act working to undermine the struggle of Indigenous people to end colonial oppression.

Given this dynamic, the "apology" could certainly be expected to have an impact on Indigenous people, which was characterized generally in the mainstream media as "mixed" at best. This reflects the healthy level of distrust among Indigenous people as to the true intentions and

meaning of the "apology," all hype aside. While many survivors interviewed in the media appear to have accepted the apology, many have also completely rejected it, and very few actually believe it will be of much consequence in terms of the healing process Indigenous people are still going through.

Towards 'truth and reconciliation' on Indigenous terms

Whether it is over the ability to decide what will and will not happen on our own lands, or how we are to overcome the impact of the residential school experience and what to do with those criminally responsible, it is essential to carry out these struggles on our own terms. Time and time again this approach has proven to be the most effective way to move forward in our struggles.

For this reason, we have to recognize the inherent limitations to the upcoming "Truth and Reconciliation Commission." Unlike the commission of the same name that took place in post-apartheid South Africa, this commission is being headed by the same racist institutions responsible for the crimes under study, not to mention the crimes it continues to commit.

With a power dynamic like this, we can't expect real truth or reconciliation to come out of this commission. We especially can't expect these things from the commission under the Harper government, the same government that voted against ratification of the UN declaration on the rights of Indigenous people, the same government which is still pushing for the extinguishment of aboriginal title (to mention only two of its main anti-Indigenous policies).

The most effective means of healing the wounds of the residential school experience will be to challenge the very foundations of its existence. This includes the grassroots work of survivors that have been fighting for several decades to see real justice for the perpetrators of the crimes of the residential school project. Without this effort the Canadian government would have never been put in a position to issue an "apology," however weak and limited that apology was. This challenge also includes the struggles against the destruction of Indigenous territories going on all across Canada.

These struggles for sovereignty open up space for true healing, not just of the problems we face as a result of the genocidal residential school project, but all the problems we are forced to deal with as a result of Canadian colonialism.

Mike Krebs is an Indigenous activist in Vancouver and a contributing editor of Socialist Voice.

Related Reading:

- Mike Krebs. *Roots and Revolutionary Dynamics of Indigenous Struggles in Canada*.

Footnotes

[1] From interview with Al-Jazeera English, available at http://youtube.com/watch?v=LJazWy0HHc4

[2] See for example *'Healing begins when the wounding stops: Indian Residential Schools and the prospects for "truth and reconciliation" in Canada,'* by Ward Churchill, http://briarpatchmagazine.com/2008/06/09/healing-begins-when-the-wounding-stops/.

See also *'An Historic Non-Apology, Completely and Utterly Not Accepted,'* co-authored by Roland Chrisjohn, Andrea Bear Nicholas, Karen Stote, James Craven (Omahkohkiaayo i'poyi), Tanya Wasacase, Pierre Loiselle, and Andrea O. Smith, http://www.marxmail.org/ApologyNotAccepted.htm

[3] Andrea Smith, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*. South End Press (2005), Cambridge MA. p. 22.

[4] Hubert O'Connor was a Roman Catholic bishop of the British Columbia diocese of Prince George. He resigned after being charged with sex crimes in 1991. He was convicted in 1996 of committing rape and indecent assault on two young aboriginal women during the 1960s when he was a priest. He was sentenced to 2 1/2 years in prison, but was released on bail after serving six months.