

Zinovievism vs. Leninism

Leninism and Zinovievism

A tragedy of 20th century socialism was that Stalinism was able to present itself as the continuation of Bolshevism, to draw upon the confidence that the world working class placed in the Russian Revolution, and so to be able to redefine socialism as state nationalization of the means of production, and not as workers power. Stalinism used the Bolshevik legacy to betray and destroy revolutions internationally as well as to corrupt the politics of its victims, namely advanced worker militants from the 1930s to the 1980s.

Ideologically, the left was further confused when liberals, social democrats and anarchists joined bourgeois academics in agreeing with the equation of Stalinism with Bolshevism, or its slightly more sophisticated variant, that Leninism leads to Stalinism. Large numbers of radicals, rightly disgusted by bureaucracy, fell for these historical myths, accepting the “common sense” of the political consensus. For many years, those of us in the Internationalist Socialist tradition were isolated. To defend the first successful proletarian revolution, as well as the idea that other revolutions would not inevitably lead to bureaucratic societies, we had to fight without any accommodation to the left around us, to defend Leninism from opponents as well as some would-be “friends.” We also had to sharply delineate our revolutionary opposition to Stalinism from the prevalent reactionary, Cold War anti-Stalinists, and their liberal and social-democratic camp followers.

The unique, complicated, perplexing historical process of the degeneration of the Russian Revolution, which nevertheless maintained the nationalized property forms that arose from the revolution, confused even Trotsky and led some revolutionary opponents of the bureaucracy to accept Stalinism as a poor, second-rate, distorted but living continuation

of the workers’ state. We had to overcome this morass and to face the reality that the Russian Revolution, the Communist Parties that initially developed to spread the revolution, and the workers’ state had all been destroyed by the Stalinist counterrevolution.

Lack of clarity extends even more to Zinovievism, the process by which the strangling of workers’ democracy in Russia was spread into the Communist International. Some of the confusion arises because [Zinoviev](#) was the president of the Comintern in its heroic, democratic, revolutionary years from 1919-23, as well as its years of deterioration from 1924-27, but not in the years of the total Stalinist consolidation in 1927-29. Zinoviev’s bureaucratic politics and methods were originally accepted as necessities due to civil war conditions, and then later justified as virtues. They continue to bewilder revolutionaries who can’t fully separate Zinovievism from the Leninism that it was gutting, or from the Stalinism that destroyed it.

The so-called “Bolshevization” campaign, Zinoviev’s seminal policy to squeeze the life out of the norms of proletarian democracy, was introduced in the Communist International ([Comintern](#)) at its fifth congress in June 1924. It took more than three years to fully implement and to transform the Communist Parties (CPs). Internationally, the campaign represented the process of transition between the revolutionary workers’ parties of the early 1920s and the Stalinist CPs from 1929 on, when they were controlled as foreign-policy pawns of the Russian bureaucracy. Transition is not the same as completion. Like Russia in the 1920s, Zinovievism represented a deteriorating revolution becoming less democratic, less socialist, less proletarian, more bureaucratic—but not yet the full Stalinist counterrevolution, which raised the bureaucracy to independent class power and rule, requiring the destruction of the already bureaucratized Bolshevik party and all of its wings.

Zinovievism is often used as a term of abuse in the revolutionary movement—to condemn

undemocratic and bureaucratic practices—without necessarily specifying the exact content of the distortions of workers’ democracy for which Zinoviev was responsible. Our anti-Zinovievism, like our anti-Stalinism, is opposed to those who want to equate it with Bolshevism. Our critique is from the vantage point of Leninism, the defense of the politics, practices, norms and organizational functioning of the communist movement before its Zinovievist degeneration or its Stalinist destruction.

Adequate history of the day-to-day organizational life of the Leninist parties in their revolutionary proletarian years is thin. Nor could there be any recipe book for Leninist party functioning, which was a dynamic, evolving interaction of revolutionary organization with the constantly changing demands and consciousness of the working-class movement in struggle. Leninist norms were passed onto us in a few, revolutionary histories and memoirs, as well as in the oral history and traditions of revolutionary communist survivors of the 1920s who were the crucial link to revolutionary organizations, including our own, from the 1930s into the 1970s. This helped maintain proletarian democratic practices within some sections of the Trotskyist movement, while people who were originally partisans of Zinoviev in the Communist battles of the 1920s and accepted his bureaucratic methods as genuine Leninism went on to lead some other Trotskyist groups. It is to reassert authentic, revolutionary, democratic Leninism that we draw the contrast with Zinovievism. Our aim is to eliminate those aspects of the degeneration of the Russian revolution that continue to influence parts of the revolutionary movement.

Leninist Politics, Workers’ Democracy and World Revolution

Organizational concepts serve political purposes. All political parties are organized around class political goals. For Leninism, the theory and practice of proletarian revolution, the politics organizing the Bolshevik party, were workers’ democracy and world

revolution. More than any other organization, the Bolshevik Party unified theory and practice with the day-to-day, partial, limited, reformist struggles of workers with the revolutionary goal of taking state power, to raise the working class to the position of ruling class, through conscious, democratic collective control of the state and the economy. Lenin, more than any other Marxist theoretician, elaborated the essential character of a workers’ state, and the internal democratic life of the Bolshevik workers’ party was in harmony with that goal.

Lenin’s famous arguments that a cook can govern and that workers must control production and distribution came from the conception of Soviet (workers’ council) power, the destruction of the old state and of all repressive apparatuses—police, army, courts and bureaucracy—over the working class. An armed working class would make and enforce all laws through the active, direct democracy of workers’ organizations—workers’ councils, factory committees, unions, red guards, militias, political parties, and organizations of the oppressed. The basis for the privileged bureaucracy was to be eliminated: all officials would be elected and recallable, with none earning more than a worker.

To emancipate itself, the advanced, conscious, revolutionary layer of the working class had to organize itself as a party, capable of providing leadership to win over the majority of the working class for revolutionary action in the process of its becoming fit to rule. This took years of party-building—to develop the revolutionary program, strategy, tactics, leadership, cadres, political cohesiveness, disciplined collaboration, loyalty, and party roots in workplaces and workers’ organizations; to gain the confidence and trust of workers based on deeds, not just words; and to merge with the masses in unleashing their creativity, genius and capacity for self-organization in a mass revolutionary upheaval from below.

The perspectives of the Bolsheviks were that all of Europe was on the verge of socialist revolution. The Russian Revolution was the first, the initiator, of the world revolution.

While Russia was ripe for socialist revolution, it was not ripe for socialism. Backward Russia could only come to socialism with the support and cooperation of a few advanced industrial socialist countries. In Lenin's words, "The Russian proletariat is following events [in Germany] with the keenest attention and enthusiasm. Now even the blindest workers in the various countries will see that the Bolsheviks were right in basing their whole tactics on the support of the world workers' revolution."

The Bolshevik's perspective was proven correct in practice. Revolution broke out in Austria, Hungary, Germany, Finland, and Italy, while pre-revolutionary situations developed in much of the rest of Europe from 1917 to 1923. Soviets, workers' councils and factory committees sprang up in most major European cities; soviet republics briefly took power in Hungary and Bavaria. The working class was ripe for revolution but lacked the leadership and political organization necessary to take power. Worse, its old leaders and organizations, the social-democratic parties, allied with the capitalists in putting down proletarian revolution in blood.

Isolation and Degeneration

The isolation of the revolution in one underdeveloped country meant it could not survive. The course of the destruction of the revolution is well known in our movement: civil war; the invasion of Russia by 14 imperialist countries; the collapse of industry by more than 80 percent; two-thirds of the 1917 industrial proletariat gone by 1921; famine and starvation; desertion by the urban population of Petrograd, Moscow, and other cities; epidemics of typhus and tuberculosis; and forced grain collections leading to peasant revolts, including Kronstadt. One political party after another was declared illegal as they supported or collaborated with the counterrevolution. Meanwhile, the Bolshevik party was transformed as its members were incorporated into command posts in the Red Army and assimilated into state and economic administration.

These conditions were not an ideal school for workers' democracy, but they were the reality the Party faced in 1921 as the Civil War ended. At the 10th Party Congress in March 1921, the Party was bitterly, factionally divided over the results of the collapse of the country and War Communism. The divided Party would not be able to continue to hold onto power under these circumstances. The solution reluctantly accepted was the adoption of the New Economic Policy. All factions accepted this restoration of aspects of the capitalist market as a necessity to restore peasant grain production and industry, and all factions eventually voted for Lenin's proposal that without party unity it would be impossible for the working class, and the Bolsheviks as their political representatives, to hold onto power, and therefore it was necessary to temporarily ban factions.

When [Riazanov](#) proposed that factions be banned permanently, Lenin argued against that proposal and won, on grounds that if a fundamental political question arose, similar to the internal struggle over the Brest-Litovsk Peace Treaty, it would be necessary to go back to factions and elections based on factional platforms. Lenin stressed that the ban on factions was a temporary measure only, necessitated by the dire situation in Russia, which could be rescued by the German Revolution, which was to be expected, Lenin declared, in the next months. Nor was the banning of factions an attempt to end political debate or dissent: All major factions—Trotsky's, Bukharin's Workers Opposition, Democratic Centralists—were elected to and represented in the new Central Committee.

Notwithstanding these intentions to limit the unavoidable, temporary incursions into democracy, the unintended consequence of the 10th Congress was the stranglehold that the bureaucracy was able to quickly impose on the Party. Factions were never again legalized; the ban, never lifted, became permanent. Nonetheless, despite the bureaucracy's control, the whole history of 1920s Russia is one of factional struggle by different social classes that penetrated the Bolshevik Party (which

became the only legal political space as other parties were banned for their support for the counterrevolution). Despite the legal ban on factions, they continued to exist, but since they were not “legitimate,” their democratic rights were severely curtailed whenever they challenged the party bureaucracy. In March 1921, there were 600 party fulltimers; in 1922 there were 15,325 fulltimers, and when Stalin was elected general secretary that year, he moved rapidly to gain tight control over the expanded party apparatus.

In banning factions, the Bolsheviks were extending the substitutionist practices that arose, of necessity, from the civil war. The first step was the banning of other parties that supported or tolerated the counterrevolution, fighting the revolution not through democratic debate, but by means of assassinations, attempted insurrections, military battles, and imperialist support. Banning counter-revolutionary parties was unavoidable, but the unfortunate consequence of a single legal party was the decline of political life in the soviets—in effect, the substitution of the only legal party for the representative body of the working class. This process was inadvertently expanded by the banning of factions—substituting the leadership, soon to be replaced by the emerging party apparatus, for the working-class ranks of the party.

The Bolsheviks were not conscious of the process in which they were involved. They had no experience of Stalinism; they were unaware that they were helping to lay the groundwork for the rise of the bureaucracy and the destruction of the revolution by Stalinist means. They thought they were hanging onto power until the European revolution could rescue them from the situation forced upon them. This road, Lenin declared, represented a retreat from democracy and a retreat from socialism—but a necessary, temporary measure.

If the Bolsheviks had opened things up and lost power, the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries, which were the parties of the petty bourgeoisie, and the capitalist democrats were too weak to hold power. The only other

social force capable of taking power was the counterrevolutionary white guards, which the Bolsheviks had just defeated in the civil war. The Bolsheviks could not ignore the consequences of opening the road for the counterrevolution to come to power. When the Soviet republics in Hungary and Finland fell, the White Terror had carried out mass murder of communists and other working-class militants as well as their families. In Germany in 1919, some tens of thousands were killed by the social democrats-Freikorps alliance in the civil war. In the Ukraine during the civil war, the Whites had engaged in a pre-Holocaust murder of 100,000 Jews, indiscriminately killing men, women, the elderly, and children.

The idea of hanging onto power in less-than-democratic conditions with the hope that the German revolution would bail them out “in a few months,” in Lenin’s words, seemed a much better proposition than exposing the entire Russian population to White terror and massacre. Nonetheless, the measures required to retain power, and their unintended consequences, aided the rise of the bureaucratic apparatus over the Bolshevik Party. That apparatus would eventually destroy both the Bolshevik Party and revolutionary possibilities throughout the world.

Zinoviev and the Destruction of Leninism

Zinovievism was the initial ideological assault on Leninism that the rising bureaucracy used to housebreak and destroy the Comintern as a revolutionary threat to its rule. Stalinism was then able to build on the groundwork prepared by Zinoviev. Zinoviev and Stalin collaborated in inventing a “cult of Lenin” whose tenets were designed to eradicate the real Leninism.

Zinovievism as a distinct political tendency existed for a few years, from 1924-27, and as a loose underground network for a few more years. Its origins were shaped by three historic forces: the bureaucratic apparatus that emerged from the degeneration of the Russian revolution; the defeat of the German Revolution in 1923 (undermining both the perspectives of world revolution and the

substitutionist policies they justified); and the death of Lenin. The latter opened up the succession struggle of the troika of Zinoviev, [Kamenev](#) and Stalin against Trotsky—representing the class drive of the bureaucracy against the remaining control and power of the working class over soviet institutions and life.

These historical events and trends produced the political program and organizational changes adopted by the Comintern at its fifth congress in June-July 1924. That congress argued that world capitalism had stabilized itself and that world revolution was no longer on the immediate agenda. In place of world revolution, the congress adopted the theory of “socialism in one country.” This Zinovievist invention was the policy that Stalinism would expand as its ideological foundation: socialism could be developed in isolated, backward Russia, coexisting with world capitalism by avoiding threats to capitalism and making alliances with capitalist countries, with the support of foreign communist parties. The role of the CPs was no longer revolution in their own countries, but defense of the Soviet Union, its foreign policies, and its bureaucratic leadership.

The fifth congress also adopted an early, primitive version of the theory of “social fascism,” which was later to prove so destructive to the German labor movement and helped grease the wheels for Hitler’s triumph. The resolution reads, “All bourgeois parties, particularly social democracy, take on a more or less fascist character. Fascism and social-democracy are two sides of the same instrument of capitalist dictatorship.” The resolution continues, “social-democracy has been caught up in a process of change; from being the right wing of the labor movement, it is becoming one wing of the bourgeoisie, in places even a wing of fascism.” The French CP went further and declared that anarchists were also fascists.

The congress overturned the policy on united fronts with reformists—one of the great lessons that had been fought for and won by Lenin and Trotsky at the third and fourth congresses to help overcome the infantile

leftism of many of the newly formed Communist Parties, teaching them how to win mass support. Hereafter, there could be no united fronts based on agreements with social-democratic organizations or their leaders. United fronts had to be under Communist leadership; in essence, Communist fronts were to replace agreements with reformist or syndicalist organizations for joint, if limited, activity.

The Bolshevization campaign declared that struggle had to be conducted against the most dangerous ideological deviations from Leninism, which were defined as Trotskyism and Luxemburgism. Zinoviev invented both, as he later confessed to Trotsky, although they took on a life of their own in the revolutionary movement. The Theses on Bolshevization during the Fifth Plenum of the Comintern Executive in April 1925 declared: “Trotskyism is a particularly dangerous deviation from Leninism; it is a variety of Menshevism combining European opportunism with left-radical phases which frequently conceal its politically passive character... a years-long system of struggle against Leninism... To achieve Leninism in the Comintern means to expose Trotskyism in all parties and to liquidate it as a tendency.” The anti-Trotsky campaign embodied the troika’s fear of Trotsky becoming Lenin’s heir and was the key to the entire Bolshevization policy.

Also introduced in the same Theses was the myth of Luxemburgism, a concept previously never mentioned. The Zinovievist leaders of the German Communist Party (KPD) created this myth to expel from the KPD the democratic ideas and cadres developed by Rosa Luxemburg and her disciples. The Theses on Bolshevization attacked “also the errors of Rosa Luxemburg. The closer these political leaders stand to Leninism, the more dangerous are their views in those respects in which they do not coincide with Leninism... Among the most important mistakes of the Luxemburgists of practical significance today are: the unbolshevik treatment of the questions of ‘spontaneity’ and ‘consciousness’ of ‘organization’ and ‘the masses.’ False ideas on

this question prevented them from appraising correctly the role of the party in the revolution.” This Zinovievist creation, totally alien to Lenin’s view of Luxemburg, was codified into the revolutionary canon, and the myth is still accepted, taught, and repeated, as if it were the truth by many unsuspecting revolutionaries.

The real deviation from Leninism was that all Communist Parties internationally were instructed that they had to follow the only “fully Bolshevik party, the Russian Communist Party,” and to be in truth, subordinate to its Politburo, which was now controlling Comintern policy.

Zinovievist Organization

Until 1924, the Communist International and its affiliated CPs were open, democratic, contentious, rambunctious, and full of disagreements—but able to function as cohesive, collaborative bodies. The organizational conclusions of Zinoviev’s Bolshevization campaign were an attempt to end this lively, democratic independence and collaboration and to turn the CPs from vehicles of revolution into foreign policy pawns of the Russian CP—in Trotsky’s words, from “vanguards of the revolution into border guards of the Russian bureaucracy.” The organizational methods to accomplish this goal, which would take another four years to finally complete, began the process of stamping out workers’ democracy from the Communist Parties. The measures themselves were the opposite of the Leninism that had existed until then. They included a monolithic party; the banning of factions; banning of public debate in the communist press; bureaucratic centralism in place of democratic centralism; political differences decided by “surgical” means through splits and expulsions; a change in the culture of the communist parties; and a change in what leadership and cadre meant.

The Monolithic Party

The concept of a monolithic party in which all members agree, without differences, was

introduced at the fifth congress. Prior to 1924 the concept of a monolithic party had never been proposed, in fact had never been heard of, nor appeared in any written form in communist discussions or literature. The very fact of it being raised, let alone accepted, was a reflection of how far degeneration had proceeded. It was a giant step toward the ideas of a monolithic society and a totalitarian state, in which the working class would not have any rights to disagree with the decisions of their rulers. The idea of a living, revolutionary organization that does not have disagreements is impossible—total agreement exists only because of repression or unthinking passivity. The political life of this graveyard produced parties incapable of organizing or leading a tumultuous revolutionary upheaval from below. Ideological cohesion based on shared acceptance of the principles and program of the party was replaced by ideological unanimity, defining dissent as heretical deviation, effectively banning the right of the membership to think.

Factions

Prior to 1924, factions existed in all communist parties. The whole history of Bolshevism included internal struggles between different trends, currents, factions, political evaluations, and left and right shades of opinion, including the impact and influence of working-class experience and consciousness on the Party. This was true prior to the revolution, during it, and after the victory of soviet power, although in attenuated form after 1921. Internal struggles were carried out publicly, including factional organizing when necessary. It was not Leninism, but the social-democratic parties that had banned factions, most notably the German Social Democratic Party prior to the First World War. Rosa Luxemburg and German revolutionaries were prohibited from factional organization and activity by the discipline of the SPD, which would have isolated or expelled them. This inability to have an organized left beyond a loose network prior to the start of the First World War is what retarded the development

of German revolutionary organization before the outbreak of the revolution.

The banning of factions was the logical extension of the concept of a monolithic party. Prohibiting disagreements led to the outlawing of efforts to organize over disagreements. Importantly, the ban on organizing for its own point of view applied to the membership only; the leadership was never banned for organizing for its point of view. In a healthy revolutionary organization, the leadership is the concentration of the organization's highest political consciousness; it is charged with raising the rest of the organization to that level. Its role is to initiate policies to strengthen the organization and to carry those policies in struggle in the outside world. Its job is to fight for its point of view.

In contrast, the banning of factions means banning the right of the membership to organize for any point of view that is not of the leadership. It means that the membership does not have the same rights as the leadership. The membership can only accept, and may not oppose, that which the leadership presents. A bureaucratic leadership that can't be challenged replaces a revolutionary one. A revolutionary leadership must prove, under democratic control from below, that its policies, initiatives, actions, propaganda and practice are the best alternatives for the organization. Revolutionary leadership is rendered impossible by the bureaucracy's goal in banning factions, which is the creation of a pliant, docile, passive membership incapable of challenging the leadership.

The right to form factions is a basic democratic right in any socialist organization. Without it, the membership is denied the right to think, to dissent, and to come up with alternative policies. It is precluded from presenting new ideas or new leaders. It is denied the ability to correct errors. Without the right to dissent, the membership is denied the right and necessity to bring the ideas and living experience of the rank and file and their connection with the working class and social movements into creating, developing, extending, and correcting party policy. If workers cannot control their

own party, they will not become fit to rule, to run society. It is in a revolutionary party that working-class consciousness is developed so that workers can control society. Without workers' democracy, there is no revolutionary workers party, no matter what the pretense.

Upholding the right to form factions does not mean encouraging factions, faction fights, or a factional culture— anymore than supporting the right to self-determination means a call for separation and the breakup of existing countries. The contradiction in the right to form factions (between a democratic and a factional culture) is overcome, as with the right to self-determination, not by banning these democratic rights, but by a political policy designed to overcome the necessity for their exercise—through the fullest internal democracy, the prizing and defense of democratic control, and the protection of minority rights.

In healthy Leninist parties, when differences lead to factions, the factions are expected to be temporary, ad hoc, for specific questions, and normally dissolved when the question is decided (although new information or new conditions can reopen the question for further discussion, including, if necessary, factional organization). Contrast this healthy handling of factional differences to groups that claim to allow such differences, but whose leadership is allowed to think and organize for its point of view at any time, while the membership is only allowed to think or organize for its thoughts during some limited time and space designated by the leadership.

Within a vibrant culture of revolutionary democracy, what is not healthy or welcome is when distinct political questions are bundled together into factional alignments. For example, one group of members might have differences regarding race and oppression, including a new theoretical or tactical idea, a second group of comrades might have a difference on war policy, and a third on trade union practices. Each of these groups must have the right to present its views, to organize for them, and to receive support, resources,

and comradely respect from the organization in order to try to convince the membership.

But when a faction attempts to form around all three of these generally distinct matters, however, we enter another, potentially dangerous political situation. The three questions may be joined together by a clique, by power politics, or by back-scratching deals common in bourgeois politics (where I'll support your cause not on its merits but in return for you supporting mine). Or this bundling may be the prelude to the creation of a separate tendency that may or may not threaten to become a separate organization.

A healthy democratic culture often avoids the need for factions. It strives to avoid a factional culture, divisive faction fights, and their typically toxic consequences—distrust, hostility, the replacement of joint outward activity and combat by inward struggle and orientation, and the breakdown of comradely feeling and relations of mutual loyalty. The way in which a healthy, democratic revolutionary organization precludes these poisons is by creating a culture in which minorities have every democratic right—so that there is no feeling that they have to organize in a fashion that leads to factionalism and splits.

There is a difference between temporary factions that come and go based upon different, specific political questions; and permanent factions, which often represent unprincipled cliques, personal loyalties, or potential splits. Even permanent factions cannot be banned without violating the democratic rights of the membership to think and organize for dissenting views. But not banning is not the same as welcoming permanent factions, whose loyalty is to the faction, not the organization. There is no basis for maintaining a permanent faction except for distrust of the organization and its politics, democracy, and leadership; and unwillingness to take responsibility and discipline for the entire organization. The potential divisiveness of an environment of permanent factions can create a political culture lacking in trust,

loyalty, and comradely relations, and one that raises the threat of possible splits.

The job of the leadership and membership is not to accommodate to oppositional views they consider wrong, but to argue for better politics, using patient explanation and education with the same respect we would be expected to show collaborators in the outside world. It is even more important that this be extended to our own comrades, where we do not draw the Zinovievist conclusion that the closer they are to us, the greater the ideological danger. We want, without being pollyannas, to treat oppositional comrades with respect, loyalty, and comradely feeling, laying the groundwork for overcoming factional heat and for mutual collaboration.

A sophisticated leadership and organization cannot have a similar reaction to every factional fight. It has to be able to understand the difference between loyal and disloyal factions. The strongly held views of loyal factions do not undermine mutually collaborative and comradely dedication. Disloyal factional oppositions, by contrast, value their disagreements as more important than political collaboration, and are willing to disrupt the work, discipline, and unity of the organization based on their disagreements. Only precise and sensitive political judgment can determine which situation prevails, but it is imperative not to repeat the sectarian and Zinovievist method of “surgical” response to dissent and factions—expulsions for political differences and splits. At times, splits are the only way the movement can remain true to its principles or advance, but more usually splits are extremely destructive. We must work, as much as politically and humanly possible, to avoid developing a factional atmosphere leading to expulsions and splits.

Public Discussion and Debate

In the 1920s, prior to Stalinization, minority views were often presented in the public press. We, the communists, wanted the working class to understand, to be sympathetic to, to take an interest in, to be involved with the discussions that we were conducting, to take seriously and

to make their own our debates in order to develop our political program and organization. We had nothing to hide or be ashamed of in the political debates and political life of our organization. We normally draw a distinction between private discussions over personnel, internal problems, security, organizing for external combat and not allowing our opponents to see our plans, and what was open for public discussion and view. Our politics, including disagreements, were public, and were debated in front of working-class opinion in our press. At times in the Russian CP, this extended to minorities even having their own newspapers. This sort of open debate could only occur in a party that had strong political cohesion based on mutual agreement on firm principles, and the acceptance of loyal, disciplined cooperation and trust.

The right to public disagreement does not mean that any question, disagreement, or constant re-discussion of settled questions by any group of members had to be immediately debated either internally or in the public press. The majority has its right to set priorities and activity, including when, where and what is open to debate. If it is democratic and sensitive to minority rights, it is highly unlikely that the membership will tolerate this being questioned.

Democratic Centralism

Zinovievism was the replacement of democratic centralism by bureaucratic centralism, of discipline based on political conformity to the decisions made by the leadership that could not be challenged by the ranks. There is of course no necessity for discipline if there are no disagreements. Democratic centralism is centralized, disciplined action despite tactical or political differences inside the membership, which is democratically decided on. Likewise, there is no real need for democracy in a discussion group, which can endlessly re-discuss, and need not come to any conclusions or engage in any action. Our democracy is an active one, designed to reach decisions that enable us to engage in collective action. There is no

democracy without centralism, the responsible implementation of decisions made by conventions, branch meetings, or democratically elected and responsible leading bodies.

Leninist parties were organized to provide political combat for revolutionary politics against other policies and ideologies, to fight to raise consciousness within the mass organizations of the working class and the oppressed, and to meet the centralized, disciplined power of the state and the employers with a centralized, disciplined opposing force. Like all dialectical conceptions, democratic centralism is concrete. What is democratic centralism in one set of concrete circumstances can be its opposite in another set of circumstances. Correct, disciplined activity can only be justified by the correctness of the policies, not by a rule book, or a bureaucratic order from above.

The amount of discipline required depends on circumstances, timing, and the relationship between leadership and ranks: command in a situation when we enter combat, totally free discussion in the absence of immediate action, and a looser, more patient attitude toward new members, but continued tighter discipline from older comrades charged with the political integration of new recruits and keeping the organization on an even keel. In other words, democratic centralism requires different things of different individuals at different times in the interest of an expanding conception of responsibility and discipline alongside an overall expansion of consciousness and commitment. It was this deeply, unruly revolutionary communist culture of an activist, anti-elitist democracy from below that Zinovievism wanted to replace with a pliant membership ready to obey commands from above without question.

The Culture of the Organization

At its best, the culture of the organization consisted of open, democratic discussion and debate, a respectful attitude toward differences, a comradely collaboration, a lack

of personalism, moralism and individualism; a division of labor in which everyone has a respected part to play, necessary for the effective functioning of the whole organization; a constant education and training to raise the political level and leadership potential of the whole membership to develop everyone to their maximum potential for leadership in the outside world; an agreement with and commitment to the basic traditions, political program, and theory of the revolutionary movement; and a loyalty to their comrades, collaborators, and political organization. This culture of the revolutionary communist movement in its best days was destined to be destroyed by the bureaucratic centralization. It took years to wipe it out. In Germany, 30 percent of the members belonged to the Left Opposition, and there were still ten factions in 1927, but by 1928 the overwhelming majority of the membership of 1923 had been expelled. In France, the Bolshevism campaign of 1924 led to a 70 percent turnover in membership by 1926.

Leadership and Cadre

Leninism places tremendous emphasis on the subjective factor. Under specific historic circumstances, when objective conditions for revolution are mature, the subjective factor is decisive. Twentieth century revolutionary history confirmed that the key to success is a politically experienced revolutionary party with mature leadership and a disciplined cadre capable of providing leadership. That still remains true as shown by the outcome of the working-class upsurge in Egypt and Greece. Working-class revolution is dependent for success on the development of revolutionary organization, leadership, and program.

Zinoviev's Bolshevization campaign was a wrecking operation on the subjective factor: the new, promising, but far from mature 1920s Communist worker parties. Zinoviev's assault on party democracy was the prologue that made them ripe pickings for Stalinization. Leninist norms of leadership, as well as its extraordinary emphasis on worker-Bolsheviks as the cadre key to party building, were lost in the crackup of the Comintern, only preserved

in small groups on the margins of the radical movement.

Zinoviev made and replaced leaderships at will, through overseas decisions based on sycophantic, personal, careerist loyalty, not competency. Purges and expulsions for dissent created a submissive membership trained to accept without thinking the changing twists of CP politics, no matter how bizarre. Despite this dismal record, Zinoviev's methods died hard in the fantasy imitations of the Comintern. In our own experience more than a decade ago, the ISO was expelled from the International Socialist Tendency (IST) on perspectives, not principles. In dispute was that our membership and leadership should decide our political line, not directives from the Central Committee of the British SWP. It was reestablishing this fundamental principle of Leninism—the necessity for a revolutionary group to stand on its own feet, to be able to think for itself, to make decisions, and when they are wrong to have the honesty and intelligence to correct them—that led to our reexamining some Leninist norms lost by the SWP.

A leadership and cadre lacking independent thought and action and a membership without democratic initiative and control never develop the capacity for revolutionary leadership. Leninist leadership is selected for being the most advanced, politically conscious, active, aggressive fighters for our political principles and program. For us, effective leadership requires a collaborative collective with a division of labor, drawing upon different individual strengths and talents, but taking collective responsibility for the organization and the leadership team. Leninist leadership is not based on seniority, sycophancy, personal friendships, personal loyalty, or how eloquently it talks, but on how it performs, i.e., whether the policies, perspectives, initiatives, and activities it proposes and takes responsibility for carrying out are proven correct.

The leadership is charged with organizing the group for external combat, to change consciousness, to provide leadership in

struggle, including ideological struggle, as much as our size and the state of the movement makes possible. Without correct political lines and actions, confidence in the leadership, in the organization and in its politics are questioned and undermined. Confidence in the politics and leadership of the organization is a necessity for an organization based on a high level of discipline in action. A general hostility to leadership around us, and our job is to contribute and lead on the basis of what we know. We teach people how to collaborate effectively in a disciplined fashion, despite disagreements, which are a normal and necessary part of any living democratic organization, in order to be the most effective we can be and in order to overcome the individualistic, personalistic “star system” of reformist and petty bourgeois organizations. We try to find a role for every member and to value and respect them for the work they contribute to the division of labor in the organization as part of an organic whole.

The cadres have the responsibility of integrating the new members, educating them on the movements’ politics and traditions, training them on revolutionary functioning, giving them the confidence to overcome doubts, confusion, and demoralization in a non-revolutionary period. The cadres have to win new members to long-term commitment and activity, particularly in a confused situation in which despite crisis, austerity and at times explosive resistance, there is a lack of sustained movement struggle.

The cadres have to place their disagreements in context, overcome personal difficulties, and engage in a collaboration that is open, expanding, and inclusive. The cadre has higher standards for itself, higher responsibilities, and a greater sense of discipline. It is the political development, maturity, commitment, consciousness, and discipline of the cadres that allows for the organization to make sharp turns without undue internal strife and factionalism. Without this, we cannot take advantage of the rapid shifts necessary when people go into motion. It is the strength of the cadre that can keep the organization from going up and down

with each instance of movement success or setback. It is the cadre, its expansion, its collaboration, its collective role nationally that decides the health of the organization and determines its success. The concept of the Leninist cadre is the keystone of building a revolutionary party.

Liquidate Zinovievism

The defeat of the German Revolution and the degeneration of the Russian Revolution were carried over into the Comintern by Zinoviev’s “Bolshevization campaign” of 1924. It did immense damage to the Communist parties as well as to the theory and practice of Leninism. Zinoviev finally recoiled from his own creation and joined Trotsky to form the United Left Opposition in 1926. When he was murdered by Stalin, thousands of Trotskyists and other oppositionists in the Russian concentration camps held strikes, demonstrations, and protests in honor of their fallen comrade. Nonetheless Victor Serge was right when he observed, “Zinoviev was Lenin’s greatest mistake.”

We are partisans of the Russian Revolution as the greatest act of working class self-emancipation and human liberation in history. We understand and sympathize with the revolutionary movement and the heavy and tragic decisions it had to make during the civil war, and its commitment to keeping workers power alive while waiting for relief from the European Revolution. Zinovievism was both product and ideology of the degeneration of the revolution, prior to its final defeat by the Stalinist counter-revolution.

There is no reason today to defend the process of degeneration, or as Lenin called it, “retreats from democracy” and “retreats from socialism” that resulted in the gutting of the revolution and the gutting of Leninism. We stand for the most democratic revolution possible, the “revolution of the immense majority, in the interests of the immense majority.” We have the most democratic organization that exists in the image for which it is created. We want to reassert Leninism as

the guide to that revolution and organizational practice. We want to liquidate any barriers to that, and we want the revolutionary movement internationally to liquidate Zinovievism and any lingering remnants from the period of degeneration in order to return to a genuine, democratic Leninism.

Joel Geier, Chicago, February 2014