

# Communist Organisation and Discipline

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## A Premise to the Question

The important discussion presently going on within the Russian Communist party throws into relief problems concerning the internal life of revolutionary parties. They also arise within the polemics of communists against other movements who seek to appeal to the proletariat and in the internal debates, and whenever disagreements or particular crises arise within our international communist organisation.

However, as is often the case, it is wrong to pose the question by setting one against the other two allegedly contrasting positions: mechanical dependence on the centre versus majoritarian democracy. The issue should instead be approached with a dialectical and historical method; a "principle", either centralist or democratic, to be used as a fundamental reference point to start from compulsorily in order to solve the problem, would be a nonsense for us Marxists.

In one of *Rassegna Comunista* issues we published an article on the "Democratic Principle", taking into consideration its application both in the State and in the political and union organisations, and demonstrating that for us such a principle has no subsistence whatsoever; we can only speak of a mechanism of numerical and majoritarian democracy, which can be convenient, for certain organisations, in given historical situations, to introduce or not.

The illusion of democracy is that the majority always knows the best way ahead, and that by voting each individual carries the same weight and influence. A criticism of this idea is implicit in Marxist thought, and this criticism not only rebuts the monumental swindle of bourgeois parliamentarianism, but also applies to the majority principle being utilised within the revolutionary state, the economic organisations of the working class and even to our party, with the exception of situations where alternative organisational choices do not exist. Nobody knows better than we Marxists the importance of organised minorities and the absolute necessity, for the proletarian class and the party that directs it, to act in a strictly disciplined manner and in strict accord with the party's policy.

But if we are thus liberated from any egalitarian and democratic prejudice, that still should not lead us to base our action on a new or different prejudice which is the formal and metaphysical negation of the former. In this sense, we make reference to what written in the first part of the article on the national question (*Prometeo* no 4), on how to face the great problems of communism.

The expression used in the texts of the International, "democratic centralism", indicates sufficiently that the practice and rules of Communist parties are somehow at a half way house between absolute centralism and absolute democracy, and comrade Trotski has drawn attention to this in a letter which has given rise to large debates amongst the Russian comrades.

Let us however say straightaway that if we are not able to seek a solution for revolutionary problems by appealing to the traditional abstract principles of Liberty or Authority, we do not find it any more expedient to look for a solution in a mixture of the two, as if they were fundamental ingredients to be combined.

For us, the communist position on the question of organisation and discipline should be more complete, satisfactory and original. To define it briefly, we have for a long time preferred the expression "organic centralism", thus indicating that we are against any autonomist federalism, and that we accept the term centralism for its meaning of synthesis and unity, as opposed to the almost random and "liberal" association of forces arisen from the most varied independent initiatives. As concerns a more thorough development of the above conclusion, we believe it can be derived, far better than from the continuation of this study of which we are giving here a mere preliminary outline, from texts that are likely to be discussed in the fifth world Communist Congress. In part, the problem is also dealt with in the theses on tactics for the fourth Congress.

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Let us now pass to some historical experiences, which are to be borne in mind in order to avert any simplistic solution of the problem, either that requiring at all moments a poll to prove the rightness of the majority, or that agreeing at any rate and all the time with the central and supreme hierarchies. It's a matter of showing how, by a real and dialectical process, we can actually overcome painful questions, often engendered in everyday party life by disciplinary issues. If we recall the history of the traditional socialist parties and of the II International, we see that these parties, i.e., the opportunist groups that had their leaderships, used to shelter themselves with the bourgeois principles of democracy and autonomy of the party organs. That nevertheless did not prevent them from using largely the bugbear of discipline towards majorities and leaders, against the left elements that reacted to opportunist and revisionist tendencies.

This method eventually became the main expedient by which those parties were able to carry out, above all at the outbreak of the world war, the function of instruments for the ideological and political mobilisation of the working class by the bourgeoisie, a function that meant their final degeneration. In this way an out and out dictatorship of the right was built up in these parties; the revolutionaries had to fight it, not because intrinsic principles of internal party democracy were violated, or to oppose the idea of centralisation of the class

party (which the Marxist left was in favour of), but because in the concrete situation it was necessary to fight actual anti proletarian and anti revolutionary forces. Thus, within those parties the method of creating factions, opposed to the leaderships and devoted to pitilessly criticise them, was fully justified; this activity would eventually lead to separations and scissions that made the foundation of present day Communist Parties possible. It is therefore obvious that the principle of discipline for discipline is, in given situations, utilised by the counterrevolutionaries to hinder the development leading to the formation of the true class revolutionary party.

The best example of the way to deal with such demagoguery and sophistry was given by Lenin himself. He was a hundred times attacked as dissolver, disintegrator, violator of party rules, but he nevertheless unflinchingly kept his course and perfectly logically became the champion of the sound Marxist criteria of organic centralisation within both the State and the Party of the revolution. On the contrary, the most unfortunate example of a formalistic and bureaucratic enforcement of party discipline was given by the vote Karl Liebknecht felt bound to give on August 4, 1914, in favour of war credits.

It therefore appears certain that in certain moments and in given situations (the likelihood of occurrence and reproduction of which we will have to better examine in due time) the revolutionary direction is marked by a break of discipline and by the hierarchical centralisation of a pre-existent organisation.

The situation is no different within trade unions, many of which are still led by counterrevolutionary groups. Again in this case, the leaders are touched by democracy and bourgeois freedom, and side with those who reject with repugnance the communist theses on violence and revolutionary dictatorship. Nevertheless, the communists who fight within such organisms must continually denounce the dictatorial procedures of these bureaucratic mandarins; and the best way to dethrone them is to require in assemblies and ballots the respect of democratic procedures. This does not mean however that we must develop a dogmatic worship for statutory democracy, as we do not rule out at all the possibility, in certain circumstances, of taking the leadership of these organisms by means of a surprise attack. A guidance able to connect us to our revolutionary end cannot therefore be given by the formal and constant homage paid to officially invested leaders, and not even by the impeccable accomplishment of all formalities of an electoral consultation. We repeat that our solution is to be constructed in a quite different and superior way.

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The matter appears to be more difficult and delicate when we pass to consider the internal life of the Parties and of the Communist International. A whole historical process separates us from the situation which, within the old International, determined the constitution of factions, which were parties within

the party, as well as the systematically breaches of discipline and the ensuing scissions, fraught with revolutionary consequences.

Our opinion on this is that the problem of organisation and discipline within the communist movement cannot be resolved without connecting it strictly to the questions of theory, programme and tactics. We could set ourselves the task of designing an ideal model of a revolutionary party, as the final goal we expect to achieve, and try to work out the internal structure and rules of such a party. We would easily arrive at the conclusion that in such a party both fractional struggles and disagreements of peripheral organisms with the directions of the central organ shall not be allowed. We would however have solved nothing if we applied these conclusions, as they are, to our party and the International: not certainly because such integral application would not be highly desirable for us all, but because in real life we are not even close to such a picture. Real facts lead us to recognise that the divisions of Communist parties into fractions, and the differences that sometimes turn into conflicts between these parties and the International are not isolated exceptions, but the rule.

Unfortunately the solution is not so simple. We must understand that the International does not yet function as a single world communist party. It is undoubtedly on the way to achieving this result, and has made immense steps forward if compared with the old International.

But to be sure that it is actually advancing in the best possible way in the desired direction, and to adapt such a goal to our activity as communists, we must combine our faith in the revolutionary nature and capacity of our glorious world organisation with an ongoing work based on the control and rational evaluation of what goes on within our ranks and of party policy.

To consider total, perfect discipline, such as would ensue from a universal consensus also in the critical consideration of all the movement's problems; to consider such discipline not as an end result, but as an infallible means which should be employed with blind conviction, would effectively be saying, in short: "the International is the world Communist Party, and every pronouncement of its central organs must be faithfully followed". This would surely be to turn the problem, a bit sophistically, on its head.

We must remember, at the start of our analysis of the question, that the communist parties are organisations whose membership is "voluntary". This fact is rooted in the historical nature of parties, rather than the recognition of whatsoever "principle" or "model". The fact of the matter is, we cannot *force* anyone to become a card carrying member, we cannot conscript communists, we cannot impose sanctions on those who do not comply with internal discipline: every member is free to leave whenever he or she wishes. We don't want to say now whether this situation is desirable or not: this is the way it is, and there's no means to change it. As a consequence we cannot adopt the formula, although it

is not without its advantages, of total obedience in the execution of orders from above.

The orders which emanate from the central hierarchies are not the starting point, but the result of the functioning of the movement understood as a collectivity. This is not to be understood in a foolishly democratic or legalistic way but in a realistic and historical sense. We are not defending, by saying this, "the right" of the communist masses to devise policies which the leaders must then follow: we are noting that the formation of a class party presents itself in these terms, and that an examination of the question must be based on these premises. The schematic conclusions we are getting to are thus outlined.

There is no mechanical discipline that can reliably ensure that orders and regulations from above whatever they are" will be put into effect. There is however a set of orders and regulations which respond to the real origins of the movement that can guarantee maximum discipline, that is, of unitary action by the entire organisation; and, conversely, there are other directives which, emanating from the centre could compromise discipline and organisational solidity.

It is, therefore, a matter of demarcating the duty of the leading organs. But who is supposed to do that? The whole party should do it, that's who, the whole organisation, and not in the trite and parliamentary sense of a right to be consulted about the "mandate" to be conferred on the elected leaders and how restricted it will be, but in a dialectical sense that takes into consideration the movement's traditions, preparedness, and real continuity in its thinking and action. Precisely because we *are* antidemocratic, we believe that a minority may have views that correspond better to the interests of the revolutionary process than those of the majority. Certainly this only happens in exceptional cases and it is extremely serious when such a disciplinary inversion occurs, as happened in the old International and which we sincerely hope will not occur within our ranks again. But even if we omit to consider this extreme case, there are however other less critical situations when the contribution which groups make by calling on the leading centre to refine or modify its instructions is useful, in fact, indispensable.

This is, in short, the basis for the study of the question, which must be faced by taking into account the true historical nature of the class party: an organism with the tendency to express the unification of all the individual proletarian struggles that arise on the social ground towards a central and common goal; an organism characterised by voluntary adhesions. In the belief that we remain faithful to Marxist dialectics, we summarise our thesis as follows: the party's action, and the tactics it adopts, i.e., the way the party acts on the "outside world", has in its turn consequences on the organisation and on its "internal" structure. Anyone who claims the party should be ready, in the name of some kind of limitless discipline, to take part in "any" kind of action, tactic or

strategic manoeuvre, i.e., outside the well-defined limits known to all party militants, would fatally compromise the party. We will only arrive at the maximum desirable level of unity and disciplinary solidity in an efficacious way by confronting the issue on the basis of this platform, not by claiming that it is already prejudicially resolved by a banal rule of mechanical obedience.