

**ON THE  
NECESSITY OF  
REVOLUTIONARY  
VIOLENCE**



**REVOLUTIONARY PRAXIS**

**30P**

"The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions." - Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels

"... the teaching of Marx and Engels concerning the inevitability of a violent revolution refers to the bourgeois state. The latter cannot be superseded by the proletarian state (the dictatorship of the proletariat) through the process of "withering away", but, as a general rule, only through violent revolution. ... The necessity of systematically imbuing the masses with this and precisely this view of violent revolution lies at the root of all the teachings of Marx and Engels." - V.I. Lenin

"A revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another." - Mao Tse-tung

"Without a people's army the people have nothing." - Mao Tse-tung

For orthodox Marxists it is axiomatic that proletarian socialist revolution necessarily, centrally and unavoidably involves violent insurrection to overthrow the bourgeois state. When pressed few, if any, Marxists of a Trotskyite, Maoist or libertarian persuasion would deny that in the last instance revolutionary violence is unavoidable. Yet the actual practice of existing organisations which claim to be revolutionary in the Marxist sense suggests otherwise.

The former Communist Party of Great Britain formally adopted the peaceful, non-violent road to socialism as long ago as 1951 in its new programme *The British Road to Socialism*. As it pronounced in the 1968 version of its programme:

"We believe socialism can be achieved in Britain, not without prolonged and serious effort, but by peaceful means and without armed struggle, and this is our aim. The working people and their representatives in Parliament will have the strength and the means to deal with the resistance of reaction whatever form it may take." (1)

In fact any serious pretention to be committed to revolutionary insurrection had been abandoned long before during the United Front Against Fascism period beginning in 1935. It was precisely criticism of this revisionist "peaceful road" line which was one of the important points which gave rise to the wave of new revolutionary movements in the imperialist countries during the late nineteen sixties. However a quarter of a century later there is no indication whatsoever of this theory becoming a material force.

The largest surviving "revolutionary" organisation in Britain which emerged from the late Sixties upsurge is the neo-Trotskyite Socialist Workers Party. In every issue of their paper *Socialist Worker* they proclaim:

"The present system cannot be patched up or reformed... It has to be overthrown."

and:

"The structures of the present parliament, army, police and judiciary cannot be taken over and used by the working class. ... At most parliamentary activity can be used to make propaganda against the present system. Only the mass action of the workers themselves can destroy the system."

At first sight this sounds better than the position of the old CPGB but on closer examination it turns out to be essentially the same. In an article entitled 'Violence: What do socialists say?' (2) SWP tells readers that:

"Whenever the press or television mentions Socialist Worker there is a fair chance our supporters will be called "extremists" bent on "violence"."

It goes on to say:

"The accusation is both wrong and hypocritical."

and:

"...but we are not pacifists who renounce all force or condemn all violence equally."

"We take sides when the oppressed fight their oppressors."

Furthermore:

"Through our protests, demonstrations and strikes we can beat governments and cut off the profits upon which the bosses' system depends."

"We can take control from below,..."

"*This kind of struggle is not based on violence.* (My emphasis) But it does require the force of numbers."

We learn that:

"The same is always true. Whenever workers mobilise in large numbers there is little violence."

and:

"The only way to avoid the terrible violence of the ruling class is for the mass of workers to use force to break those organising to crush them."

Of the Russian Revolution we are told:

"Far from being violent, the mass involvement of workers and their determination meant the revolution was virtually bloodless."

So the SWP line is that revolutionaries only use violence somewhat sparingly in self-defence against attacks from the ruling class but that even this can be kept to a minimum provided that there is mass mobilisation of the working class in non-violent actions. In other words, we revolutionaries will never be the first to take up arms and, provided we are well organised, there is no need to do so in order to overthrow the ruling class. This view is completely at variance with the world historical experience of revolution. Far from the Russian Revolution being "virtually bloodless" the Bolshevik coup in October 1917 was followed by a bloody civil war in which millions perished.

If one challenges this position with Trotskyites then they respond by saying that they do recognise the necessity for revolutionary armed struggle but that this will somehow be got together "when the time comes" and that active preparations for it are not necessary now. The SWP article mentions the military coup against the Allende regime in Chile in 1973 as an example to illustrate the fact that the parliamentary road cannot lead to



socialism. But it fails to mention that there was mass mobilisation in support of the Allende regime's reforms but that nonetheless an unarmed people were helpless against Pinochet's military coup in which tens of thousands of them were slaughtered. There is no reason to believe that any Trotskyite organisation in Britain today is making any preparations whatsoever for armed struggle and they are not likely to get it together "when the time comes". A few years ago Mike Banda, former General Secretary of the now defunct Workers Revolutionary Party, recalled how he had gone to Northern Ireland during the mass upsurge in 1969. He encountered many people who were attracted towards Marxist revolutionary ideas and wanted to find out more. However eventually they wearied of WRP's unremitting flow of newspapers and said, "What we need is guns but all you send us is bundles of the *Newslines!*" What also is noticeable is the Trotskyites' hostility to actually existing successful armed struggles such as in Northern Ireland and Peru. They seem to be more keen on armed struggles that have failed, such as in Nicaragua and El Salvador, as a result of the illusions and lack of resolution of those leading these movements.

We might expect a more definite stand on the question of revolutionary violence to be taken by libertarian communists such as Class War. In *Unfinished Business...: The Politics of Class War* (3) they state:

"...our class will certainly come to the position where they face all the armed forces of the State. ... Our class would have to face up to the military aspect of the revolution and overcome it. Workers militias and revolutionary armies will have to be considered..."

Class War have the edge over SWP in so far as they are unequivocal about the necessity of armed revolutionary struggle. Even so the actual task of military organisation and the taking up of arms is postponed to the indefinite future. However revolutionary the rhetoric of Class War may sound it is still, in the last analysis, another form of revisionism which does not really take the armed struggle seriously.

The failure to actively prepare for armed struggle by "revolutionary" organisations means that the transition to this higher stage of class struggle is postponed indefinitely. Instead political activity consists of non-violent struggle over a never ending succession of reformist issues. After all, the capitalist state does not usually engage in physical violence

unless it perceives a need to do so and all the while it is faced only with peaceful, reformist campaigns it has no necessity to resort to armed force.

It might be argued that armed struggle is not appropriate in the imperialist countries today at the present time and that only with qualitative changes in the political situation would it become possible and necessary. However we should note that the capitalist state always have armed forces ready to use if its leaders find it to be necessary. Military force is there ready to spring into action at a moment's notice. This occurred in Northern Ireland in 1969 when, confronted with the sort of mass actions favoured by SWP and the like, the British state did not hesitate to send in armed troops to contain the people. More recently during the miners' strike of 1984-5 it was perfectly apparent that the State was prepared to do whatever was necessary, including flagrantly breaking its own laws, to defeat the miners and their supporters. At the height of the struggles on the picket lines it seemed likely that the authorities were only a hair's breadth from bringing in the British Army. There can be no doubt that the capitalist state, and the capitalist class in general with their private security forces, etc., will take whatever violent measures are deemed necessary to retain power.

Some of those who agree with the above argument nonetheless argue that while armed struggle may be perfectly possible in largely rural, imperialistically dominated countries it is not possible in the predominantly urban heartlands of imperialism. Practice shows this position to be palpably false. Both the IRA in Ireland and ETA in Spain have shown that it is perfectly possible to sustain long-term armed struggle in urban industrial societies. Indeed in the case of the IRA it has the headquarters of the British bourgeoisie (the City of London) literally in a state of siege. What is more, Sinn Fein/IRA have worn down the British state, both economically and politically, to the point where the British Government is desperate for a deal which would allow them to retreat. Although not Marxist but revolutionary nationalist in its politics, the IRA have done us all a great service by demonstrating the viability of serious armed struggle within an imperialist country and on its fringes.

Another put down for armed struggle is to write it off as "petit bourgeois terrorism", by presenting it as nothing more than an extreme expression of the frustrations felt by alienated intellectuals. Reference is often made to the Red Army Faction in West Germany and it is claimed that such actions are in fact counterproductive because they provide the State with a

excuse for various repressive measures directed at the working class in general. Of course, it is true that isolated military actions by a few people who have no real base among the masses usually results in those perpetuating them ending up on the run and having to engage in armed robbery, etc. just to stay alive. That is why armed struggle is no good unless it is part of the more general revolutionary strategy of a revolutionary organisation which really does have at least some base among the working class.

Yet another objection to armed struggle is to claim that it will "alienate the masses". Is this in fact likely? Well, for a start one recalls the widespread rejoicing when the IRA almost assassinated Thatcher in the Brighton bombing and, indeed, the disappointment that they had not finished the job. Also the more rebellious sections of the proletariat have no objection to taking up the gun. "Revolutionary" organisations often hold forth in their publications about "overthrowing the bosses" and "smashing capitalism" and this appeals to some workers. However when they realise that this is so much rhetoric they quickly lose interest in revolutionary politics. The truth of it is that no organisation will win strong support for revolutionary action among sections of the working class unless it does take up arms against the enemy, especially in defence of the class when it is under attack.

A further social pacifist argument is that the power of the contemporary capitalist state is such, (both militarily and in other ways such as control of communication systems), that it cannot be defeated by a people's army. Only if at least some sections of the armed forces defect will it be possible to defeat the bourgeoisie. This is an unlikely scenario because large conscript armies are increasingly less likely to be called into existence as compared with the past. The firepower of technologically advanced weaponry means that a small professional military is usually all that is needed as in the Falklands/Malvinas and Gulf wars. It is not very willing conscript armies which revolt in the right circumstances and not professional volunteers who are heavily ideologically indoctrinated. So the defection of the capitalist state's own forces cannot be relied upon. Thus there is all the more reason why the working class needs its own underground army. As already mentioned, the fact that it is possible to build and sustain such a force is amply demonstrated by the example of the IRA in Northern Ireland. This experience also has demonstrated that the police force and army of the capitalist state as not very well adapted to nor

effective at combatting urban guerrilla warfare. It is clear that all the while the IRA has mass working class support it cannot be defeated.

There are those who do not completely reject armed struggle but claim that it should be used only as a measure of self-defence by the working class if it is subjected to physical assault from the bourgeoisie. This, perhaps, is the type of thinking which informs the SWP article quoted above, the "we shall never strike the first blow" line. This too is incorrect. As already mentioned, the capitalist state has no need to engage in physical violence against the working class all the while ideological means of control are effective at maintaining exploitation and oppression. However there is no political or moral reason as to why a revolutionary organisation based within the working class should not be the first to open fire. It is perfectly legitimate to use such means as part of an overall strategy to overthrow capitalism.

A final point often made against the armed struggle is the cost to be paid in injury and loss of life to the working class. We certainly must be under no illusions that the revolutionaries can have an easy victory if they take up the gun. Historical experience shows that the masses always suffer much heavier losses than do those they are opposing, the ruling class and their functionaries. The price of revolutionary victory is very high but what is often forgotten is that allowing capitalism to continue also exacts a heavy toll from the proletariat and other oppressed people. Quite apart from the miserable and degraded lives that many workers endure in Britain today the issue has to be seen in a global context. The fact of the matter is that imperialist oppression and exploitation has brought about a situation where there are more poor people alive now than ever before in history. What is more, hundreds of millions of these people are actually becoming even poorer. They suffer degraded lives and die quietly, largely unnoticed by the rest of the world precisely because most of them expire "peacefully" rather than violently in the course of revolutionary insurrection. The penalty for holding back from advancing revolutionary struggle to its highest level is to allow our enemies to continue without end their war against the poor.

"The seizure of power by armed force, the settlement of the issue by war, is the central task and highest form of revolution. This Marxist-Leninist principle of revolution holds good universally, for China and for all other countries." - Mao Tse-tung.



1. COMMUNIST PARTY, *The British Road to Socialism: Programme of the Communist Party*, London, 1968, p. 6.
2. *Socialist Worker*, No. 1363, 09/10/93, p. 10.
3. *Unfinished Business...: The Politics of Class War*, A.K. Press, Stirling, 1992, p. 109.

## Appendix

From the moment of its inception any genuinely revolutionary organisation must be making active preparations for carrying out armed struggle. This, of course, must be carried out in conditions of the utmost secrecy. An underground military organisation would be set up. Its structure would be parallel to that of the open, legal political organisation. The military organisation would be unequivocally subordinate to the political organisation - "the Party commands the gun". As far as possible, the personnel in the legal political and illegal military wings of the organisation should be distinct although this is not likely to be entirely the case at the outset because of sheer lack of numbers of comrades.

Arms must be obtained and training carried out. Obtaining weapons is a practical problem not too difficult to overcome. In the first instance these can be bought from illegal suppliers. At present there is a flood of cheap arms available from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. As the organisation gained support and credibility it would be able to obtain supplies from other sympathetic political organisations which had already built up a considerable arsenal, e.g. IRA, ETA. Later on in the struggle, after military operations against the capitalist state had been launched, weapons could be captured from the police and armed forces.

Military training for comrades would be a problem in so far as at the outset the organisation would have few, if any, cadres with military experience. In Britain the abolition of compulsory military service many years ago means that there are few people, especially younger ones, who possess these skills. One way to overcome the problem is to join the Territorial Army and other part-time military units. Another possibility is to persuade sympathetic organisations abroad, e.g. IRA, to provide instruction. This

problem is not insurmountable and can be overcome if it is thoroughly investigated.

The military organisation would not be simply concerned with the use of firearms and other weaponry but would encompass other illegal activities directed against the capitalist state. Particularly important would be gaining an understanding of and information about sophisticated modern communication systems. At certain stages in the class struggle intervention in and disruption of systems such as telecommunications, radio and television could be vital. Also the ability to disrupt power supplies could be a powerful tactic. The underground organisation would need to establish a network of secure premises and include many types of personnel, e.g. medical, in addition to military specialists. Indeed such cadres would probably have to have a dual role, combining military activity with other specialised tasks.

The decision to actually commence military operations would be determined by developments in the political situation. Armed struggle should not be viewed in isolation but should be seen as the "continuation of politics by other means". The right moment must be chosen to open fire because initially the primary aim of commencing hostilities would be to raise political consciousness and rally support among sections of the working class. Such an occasion could be when the forces of the capitalist state have made some heavy-handed, brutal move against some group of workers engaged in struggle. For example in recent years the cases of the Miners' Strike and the Poll Tax Riot come to mind. Appropriate action would be taken to punish leaders and functionaries of the capitalist state and this would arouse the interest and support of more politically aware workers. Military action might also be taken against fascists engaged in attacking black people and others and against lumpenproletarian elements who terrorise and exploit working people, e.g. drug dealers.

It should be recognised that in the early stages of armed struggle it will only be a relatively small minority of the proletariat and middle strata who support such actions. The majority, long imbued with social pacifist sentiments, will be hostile towards or confused about such actions. However it is from the sympathetic minority of "advanced workers" that the revolutionary organisation will recruit further cadres and thus be able to take forward, in favourable objective circumstances, the class struggle to higher and more intense levels.

The bourgeoisie will use their control of the mass media to try to discredit revolutionary military actions. This is why part of the revolutionary strategy and tactics will be subverting and disrupting the bourgeois media and establishing our own pirate and alternative means of communication. This involves much more than little newspapers and necessitates the use of modern sophisticated means of communication.

Other "revolutionary" organisations not engaged in armed struggle will be particularly antagonistic and will do their utmost to discredit the vanguard organisation. This can be seen clearly in Peru where all the social democrats, Trotskyites and revisionists hysterically denounce the People's War being led by the Communist Party of Peru (Sendero Luminoso). However this will merely serve to expose their objectively reactionary politics thus further isolating them from the masses. Some of the better elements in these organisations will finally become disillusioned with reformism and come over to the revolutionary side.

Finally, it must be realised that probably the majority of the working class and the middle strata will stand on the sidelines or equivocate until a very late stage in the revolutionary struggle. It must be understood that all revolutions have been actively made by minorities and that it is only at the point of victory, or even afterwards, that the majority of the oppressed class and various strata come over to the revolutionary cause.

(This article was first published in *Open Polemic*, No. 10, June 1994.)

There are a number of left-wing political organisations in Britain today which claim to put forward a revolutionary, Marxist political programme. Yet close examination of both the theory and the practice of such organisations reveals that most of them reject a central principle of Marxism: the necessity of the use of violence to bring about the overthrow of the capitalist state. Even the groups that recognise that capitalist states always use physical force to maintain their rule if it becomes necessary, fudge when it comes to practical preparations to deal with such an eventuality. This article argues that Britain is no different than any other country on this issue. Renewing the revolutionary movement will not be achieved unless the revolutionaries seriously address the question of how to overthrow the British capitalist state which has never hesitated to use extreme violence against those who threaten its rule.

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