

Leninist Organization and Left Refoundation from Below

by Steve Bloom

New York branch, May 15, 2004

I write this in the context of the article "Left Refoundation from Below," by Jose Perez, with which I wholeheartedly agree.

At the Solidarity summer school last year Mike Parker gave a presentation as part of a panel on "The Solidarity Experience" in which he suggested that our goal should be to become a more disciplined group. When asked directly whether this was a call for "democratic centralism" he replied in the affirmative.

That sparked a spirited discussion at the summer school which continued afterwards. Reactions have ranged from comrades who applaud Mike to those who say absolutely not, or (if they speak based on some experience) "Never Again!"—with many others somewhere in between.

The present article is written from an in-between perspective. It reflects both an experience in the Socialist Workers Party from 1968 to 1984 plus (and this, I believe, was decisive in helping to shape the thinking I suggest here) an experience in a small group called the Fourth Internationalist Tendency for 8 years after 1984 and before a majority of the FIT voted to join Solidarity.

In the FIT our political focus was examining what had gone wrong in the SWP, including with its version of "democratic centralism." I like to think that this period of introspection gave us some useful insights, a few of which I will try to share with you in the present article. Whether this is an accurate perception on my part is something readers will have to judge for themselves.

What is democratic centralism?

There are many concepts out there that go by the name "democratic centralism," and this complicates our discussion. Here I will tell you what I mean, and do not, when I use that term. Most groups on the US left who have, at one time or another, declared themselves to be "democratic centralist" will offer a definition such as: "complete democracy in the process of making a decision, unity of action in carrying it out once the decision has been made." In some respects this is not bad, but it fails to capture the subtleties of the dialectical relationship between discussion and action and, thus, becomes the source of considerable abuse, often turning into a caricature of itself.

I would assert that it is this caricature that most Solidarity comrades who today reject "democratic centralism" have either experienced directly in other organizations, or heard horror stories about. Before we can make a decision whether democratic centralism is something we favor, or do not, we need to de-mystify the concept and come to a better understanding of what democratic centralism actually is.

First, we should abandon the idea that it is some kind of exclusively leftist aberration, something practiced only by socialist revolutionaries. To one extent or another democratic centralism is widely applied, in a variety of circumstances, and understanding these various examples will help us to appreciate just how much of a caricature the more schematic leftist versions are.

For example, it will probably surprise comrades if I assert that the Democratic Party applies democratic centralism to its functioning. And yet I confidently make that statement.

Immediately this begins to demystify the "centralism in action" side of our formula, because a proper understanding requires a modifier after those words. A more complete understanding is "centralism in action when it really matters," or, we might say, "the greatest degree of centralism consistent with the level of ideological unity that has been achieved" (which requires assessing the level of ideological unity and, therefore, a greater role for the discussion process in helping to shape the "unity in action" side of the formula than most would-be Leninists are ready to acknowledge).

Note: on many questions the Democratic Party permits politicians who take or run for office under its banner to express a wide variety of views, vote different ways on legislation, attack each other during primary campaigns, etc. But when it counts Dennis Kucinich will support John Kerry for president in 2004, and he will do so enthusiastically. On key pieces of legislation, when the Democratic party leadership really wants a united vote in Congress, they let their constituent congress people and senators know, and those who violate discipline face retribution from the party.

The Democratic Party cannot formally expel people, it's true. But severe sanctions by the party can have a simi-

lar effect (think Barbara Lee after her vote against an authorization for war in Iraq). And every Democratic politician, if s/he wants to be "effective" (in bourgeois political terms) requires a reciprocal process of back-scratching by their peers. It is this process that actually enforces discipline in the party. Each individual politician is compelled to go along to get along. This ties every Democratic politician up in such a tangle of obligations that it is virtually impossible to cast a vote based on conscience on any question where the party leadership seeks to line up votes, and even at times on less consequential matters.

Revolutionary democratic centralism

I think looking at revolutionary democratic centralism through this lens will help us to understand our discussion better.

First, genuine democratic centralism requires only unity of action at key moments of the class struggle, and it never requires unity of thought and expression. How do we get unity of action when there is not political agreement on what to do? Our method is different from that used by the Democratic Party. It relies on a common commitment to revolutionary struggle and to building the kind of organization we need to carry out that struggle.

Revolutionary democratic centralism requires a certain minimum level of confidence in the organization, and of trust among comrades. The greater the level of mutual confidence and trust, the greater the degree of centralism that becomes possible. If comrades have confidence and trust in each other it will suggest to those who have questions about a certain course of action that it may well be more important to maintain the unity of their revolutionary organization than it is to have their viewpoint on this particular question applied to the class struggle.

Such a level of comradeship cannot be decreed by a vote that says "we are democratic-centralist." It can only be achieved by years of collective work and experience, in which genuine bonds of mutual trust and respect are forged.

One essential aspect of this, generally lacking in groups that simply declare themselves to be "democratic centralist," is a proper interest in a process of "mutual influence, rather than mutual ostracism" in the course of debate. What is needed is an assumption, especially at the outset of any discussion, that even when people may have disagreements, their disagreements are motivated by genuine revolutionary perspectives, that all sides in the discussion process can have important insights (that is, they might be seeing different sides of a contradictory reality). The goal of a discussion, then, is not to prove that you are right, but to help the organization as a whole to discover

what is right.

True, the assumption of a common revolutionary perspective will at times prove to be incorrect. Some discussions will be generated because a group of comrades is moving away from revolutionary politics and adapting to either reformism or sectarianism. But if we start with the assumption that all parties to a debate are prompted by genuinely revolutionary perspectives, and this turns out not to be true, the discussion will soon provide clear evidence that it is not true. On the other hand, if we start with an assumption that those who disagree with us are adapting to non-revolutionary viewpoints, the discussion can only harden quickly into warring factions, and we will never have the opportunity to find out if our assumption is false.

If all sides in any discussion feel that they are engaged in a mutual effort to discover what is true, then it becomes reasonable to ask that those who may disagree with a particular decision subordinate their disagreements to unity in action when an issue is of sufficient importance. In that case the action in question actually becomes part of the discussion process (note the dialectic again), because after it is taken there will be another opportunity for a reconsideration of the problem. The result of the action taken collectively becomes new data in the process of reconsideration. (This is codified in a long-standing revolutionary tradition of developing balance sheets on actions periodically in the course of any struggle.) Did the result of our collective action add credibility to the idea that reality is as the majority believed it to be, and the proposed action would assist us in gaining a positive result? If so then this should help to convince the minority that the majority basically has a correct sense of what is going on. Or did the results lead off in a dramatically unexpected direction, or perhaps in a direction predicted by the minority? If so then a minority can credibly cite this result as evidence that at least a part of what it has been advocating is correct.

So, in a sense, it actually becomes in the interests of a minority, if it is convinced of its viewpoint, and if it is convinced that the organization as a whole conducts discussions based on revolutionary perspectives and a fundamentally scientific approach to investigating reality, to subordinate a particular disagreement in the interests of united action which might help the organization as a whole to learn something it does not yet understand.

Of course most of our experience is in groups that do not carry out discussions in this way, where discussions are seen as a mechanism to generate a specific result, where the positions of others who disagree are not only misunderstood, but actively caricatured and distorted in order to "win" an argument. That is one reason why it is so

difficult, and takes so much time, to really establish the revolutionary organization we need, which can pursue a different approach to its internal debates.

The flip side of attempting to forge united action when an issue is of sufficient importance is *not* demanding unity in action when an issue is of secondary or tertiary significance, and it might create unneeded tensions and acrimony in the organization to demand “discipline.” In such a case it might actually be helpful for comrades to experiment with different approaches to the same problem. Permitting this when it is appropriate makes it more possible to ask for unity in action when it really counts, because every comrade will know that the request for discipline is not frivolous, not simply an effort by a majority to impose monolithism on the organization, but a genuine reflection of how it assesses the objective situation.

It is always a matter of judgment whether a particular political question calls for the implementation of centralism, and there is no substitute for good judgment and common sense on the part of a majority, or a majority leadership. The needed approach to this cannot be captured in a constitution or a set of bylaws. It requires a real understanding of what democratic centralism is, and what it is not (and the complex dialectic between the two sides of that formula, which we are only able to touch on here). The bottom line, in the end, for both a majority and for a minority, is whether a particular issue is worth creating conditions that might result in a split—either from imposing discipline (the majority) or rejecting it (the minority). Sometimes splits are justified politically, but they should be avoided if at all possible. Responsibility here, as we can see, rests with both the majority and the minority in any discussion. A majority that cannot tolerate (indeed, that does not welcome) a reasonable level of dissent and disagreement, that chooses to impose discipline in situations where it is not essential (or wise) to do so, even when it knows that such an imposition could lead to a split, is acting irresponsibly. A minority, on the other hand, which inappropriately raises the stakes in a discussion and threatens a split when it is not warranted, or when it is asked to act in a disciplined way on an important question and doing so would not be a violation of basic revolutionary principles or ethics, is doing likewise.

I repeat, there are no guidebooks or formulas. Each situation has to be assessed individually, on its merits.

Above all we cannot interpret “democratic-centralism” as calling for an organization that thinks with a single mind. As soon as that happens the organization is dead, or on the road to its demise. Differences in revolutionary perspective, debate, discussion, is the lifeblood of revolutionary politics—when these things are understood as a truth-

seeking mechanism and not as a way of bludgeoning and subduing an "opponent." At one point when we were in the FIT I remember giving a talk in which I stressed this point. A member of Socialist Action who was in attendance challenged me during the discussion period: “What about the struggle for a homogeneous party?” This idea (the struggle for a homogeneous party) had been a mantra when we were all in the SWP. I replied: “Yes, I believe in the struggle for a homogeneous party. But I believe we should worry a lot about ourselves if we ever achieve one.” This, I think, captures the dialectic of democratic-centralism rather well.

Paul Le Blanc's book, *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party* is an invaluable source for new activists (and older ones as well) seeking to develop a better understanding of this question.

Solidarity and Democratic Centralism

It follows from this that no matter how much anyone might want it, Solidarity cannot, today, turn itself into a democratic centralist organization. A vote to do so would be meaningless. Our viewpoints are too diverse and our experience in common work is too limited. Further, we do not (unfortunately) most often engage in discussions of serious disagreements with the mutual sense that this is a debate among genuine revolutionaries engaged in a truth-seeking enterprise. We fail in this respect partially because we lack the experience of working closely together in common activities, partially because we lack any training in this as the goal of discussions coming out of our predecessor organizations (and in our present one), and partially because there is a strong tendency within Solidarity to simply avoid difficult discussions entirely, to resent comrades who try to raise them.

What Solidarity could become is a group that:

- 1) tries to discover and educate on the real meaning of democratic centralism and the need to reject the caricatures that have become so prevalent on the left;
- 2) studies and develops an understanding of the relationship between socialist revolution and the construction of a democratic-centralist organization, attempting to bring the appreciation of the revolutionary movement into line with contemporary realities (which, in my judgment, will lead us to reaffirm the necessity of such an organization); and
- 3) begins the long and difficult process of actually generating the mutual trust and confidence—both through discussion and through collective work—that will allow us to construct such a revolutionary tool in the USA as the fu-

ture unfolds, understanding that this is a goal to be striven for, something that we will never achieve in any ideal sense, but will always be in the process of struggling to create. The formula I suggested above could still be applied to Solidarity: “the greatest degree of centralism consistent with the level of ideological unity that has been achieved.” This will be relatively small, in our case, but not unimportant

Regroupment and Democratic Centralism

Within a perspective of “regroupment from below” the thorough, and nuanced, understanding of democratic centralism that I advocate here becomes even more important, because the difficulty of establishing the minimum prerequisites for functioning in a disciplined way, while maintaining a genuine commitment to internal democracy, become exponentially more difficult the more different his-

tories and experiences we add to the mix. And yet, if we are serious about uniting genuine revolutionaries in the USA today, we have to talk about constituencies which go well beyond the varied traditions that have become grouped together in Solidarity.

Still, the three points I suggest above as an orientation for Solidarity could become a common project of such a broad regrouped revolutionary organization in the USA. But for that to happen we must be willing to have some patience and participate in a discussion that shows respect for everyone's experience, and everyone's viewpoint, as representing something valid that needs to be taken into account as we strive to develop a collective approach. If this can be achieved we have an opportunity to move forward toward the construction of a revolutionary democratic-centralist organization in the USA that will be worthy of the name.