

Critical Comments on "Democratic Centralism"

By Joaquín Bustelo, Atlanta

There are several things that I disagree with in the "Draft Call for Refounding Solidarity" platform that has been presented by 21 comrades. For the moment, however, I want to focus on just one aspect of their document, their organizational proposal, and in reality, only a few sentences, their general motivation.

And I am going to draw this out quite a bit because I think it is a very important subject that has been a focus of much informal discussion in Solidarity as long as I've been a member and it deserves a thorough airing.

My thesis is, quite simply, that Lenin wasn't a "Leninist." The pre-1917 Bolsheviks were not, as far as *he* understood things "a party of a new type" in the sense that this phrase has been used on the left for decades.

Instead, the "Leninist Party" model arose *after* the revolution and had two main drivers, the first, trying to spread the revolution by copying the Russians, and the second being the need of the emerging Soviet bureaucracy to silence criticism and shut down independent political organization. The end result was a harmful cult of the organization that Lenin never shared.

I have held views roughly similar to what I outline here since the mid-1980s, when I resigned from the SWP. Many years later with the Internet I became acquainted with others who held similar or parallel views, and undoubtedly that influenced what I say about these questions today.

I would recommend two articles especially, "The Myth of Lenin's 'Concept of the Party,'" by Hal Draper and Peter Camejo's "Return to Materialism." Both can be found by googling the names, and in Draper's case, it is useful to also read his earlier writings on sects, which are in the same archives as the article I mention above.

Democratic centralism and our tradition

The comrades write in their "Draft Call for Refounding Solidarity":

The Solidarity Founding Statement correctly affirms the need to build an organization that is democratic both in making and in implementing decisions. In the tradition of the communist and Trotskyist movements from which Solidarity derives, democratically making and implementing decisions is called democratic-centralism. Many Solidarity comrades, put off by caricatures of democratic-centralism they experienced, saw or heard about, now reject the term. What matters is not the term but the concept: a collective commitment to carrying out the decisions that we make as a group.

I think the comrades are creating confusion with this. "Democratic centralism" as it has been understood and practiced on the left for nearly 90 years should be *rejected*. I understand this would be unacceptable to the paleo-Trotskyist component of this grouping, and of Soli

as a whole, but nevertheless, it is the important to reject it and say so openly.

It is true that Solidarity "derives" "from" "the tradition of the communist and Trotskyist movements," but it does so in a specific way. It is a *break* from that tradition, a *negation* of significant aspects of it, *especially on the organization question*.

I disagree with the comrades in trying to differentiate between "caricatures of democratic-centralism" and the democratic centralism "of the communist and Trotskyist movements from which Solidarity derives," the former being bad, the latter good.

I do not think it is possible to just cleave off democratic centralism from this tradition as an organizational mechanism (and in reality a whole series of organization concepts that have to do with a group's concept of its relationship to other groups, mass movements and its class) and not bring with it its bosom buddy, the "Leninist" party.

'Leninism' and 'Guevarism'

I hold that the *entire* tradition that starts with the Comintern is off-base. And especially as it applies to advanced capitalist countries today, the central concept of "building a Leninist Party" is wrong. It is wrong because it starts off on the wrong foot, viewing the party as the embodiment of an idea instead of as an expression of the actual movement of a class. In our case, we do not have now and have not had the requisite conscious class movement on a mass scale for many, many decades.

Cominternist party building was an attempt to replicate the experience of the Russian Revolution just as the countless guerrilla groups in Latin America in the 1960's were an attempt to replicate the Cuban Revolution. Both were undertaken with very immediate, short term expectations of results. Both attempts failed, both in the years immediately following the Russian and Cuban revolution and on a larger time scale.

By now, after nearly nine decades, we must draw the conclusion that if it were possible to make a revolution by following *any* variant of the "classic" Russian model, it would have happened. This has been a nearly century-long experiment, a test of practice under all conceivable conditions and with thousands of attempts and more variations on the theme than even a Mozart could compose.

We should not be afraid to draw the conclusions. If The Cubans could conclude after a decade or less of experience that guerrilla warfare as a strategy or "method" (as Che called it) had proved wrong, then we should also have the courage to state the plain conclusion that has been demonstrated by nearly a

century of experience: the Zinovievist strategy of building "democratic-centralist" "Leninist parties" has also shown itself to be wrong.

To those who would say "don't throw the baby out with the bathwater," I would respond this isn't a baby. There's no such thing as an 80-some-year-old baby. This is a corpse. It is time to bury it.

To keep on doing the same thing in the expectation of getting a different result, I read somewhere once, is a definition of insanity.

Lenin and 'Leninism'

It may be objected that the Leninism the comrades want (or the "democratic centralism") is the one originally practiced by Lenin and his friends, and not the one that came afterwards with Zinoviev and the Comintern.

But during the entire time he was building the Bolshevik current and then party, Lenin never once claimed he was doing anything particularly significant or different or innovative on the organizational front. And for most of that time he identified with the "left" (in reality, as it turned out, centrist) wing of German social democracy led by Kautsky. And even as late as 1915 or 1916 he was defending the "centralism" (his word) of the German Social Democracy, and whether and to what degree he later differentiated Bolshevik centralism from reformist and Kautskyite German Social Democratic centralism is unclear to me.

At any rate, what is clear from this record is that Lenin did not view himself as having a separate, distinctive, counterposed "theory of organization" from the rest of the European socialist movement and specifically its flagship party. This was true for the entire period before the Bolshevik party was in power, or at the very least, for the big majority of that period, until well into World War I.

Even his famous dispute with the other Russian current closest to Bolshevism, the (pre-1917) Trotskyists, focused not on the organizational norms or functioning of the party, but on whether a common workers party could be built together with the Mensheviks. And, to bring that sort of differentiation to our days, it would be the same as a dispute on whether we could build a common organization with those, like the CPUSA, who have a strategic orientation to reforming the Democratic Party or organizing within it.

There have been efforts to depict this Lenin-Trotsky pre-1917 dispute about being in essence a dispute on the party, that Trotsky didn't "get" Lenin's concept of what kind of party to build. I think this is wrong.

It was about the politics, specifically, political independence from the bourgeoisie. Trotsky was mushy-soft on this being a core principle of the party, a line of demarcation between those who fit and those who didn't.

The "principle" of "Democratic Centralism" is easy enough to define: democracy in decision making, unity in action. The difficulty lies in defining just what "unity in action" consists of for microscopic propaganda groups that are not really organically rooted in the working

class, i.e., are not composed of the leaders or advanced elements that have emerged out of the actual class and social movements.

Typically, an attempt to "apply" democratic centralism to propaganda groups leads to everyone being forced to defend the common line "in public," because in reality propaganda is the "action" that such groups engage in, mostly. Even the "actions" of their members inside unions and so on have mostly a propagandistic significance at this stage. They seek to model a different approach to union leadership and activism.

For a mass workers party such as the RSDLP and later the Bolsheviks, democratic centralism means something quite different. For one thing, it has real feedback from its organic relationship to its class. A propaganda league and a mass party are qualitatively different kinds of organizations.

And if you read the actual debates and polemics where the issue of democracy and centralism in party functioning come up, you will see they have little applicability to our situation. The RSDLP was a mass party from its foundation, a party recognized by a broad advanced layer of its class as its political expression. Many of the disputes have to do with election tactics and Lenin's insistence that the RSDLP and later the Bolsheviks act as one force in the electoral arena, that to allow organizing and agitation by party members against the chosen tactic would completely undercut the effectiveness of the party among the masses that it sought to win over.

We are not a party

We don't have those kinds of problems. We don't have an advanced layer of working class fighters because we have no conscious class movement from which such a layer would arise. We are *not* a party, we are at best partly a propaganda league partly, partly an association of circles of activists, and the idea that we can obviate the distinction and function as if we were a party is wrong. Scale does matter, quantity does change into quality, an embryo of a few hundred cells looks nothing like a fully grown human being. And if it did look like a human at that stage, what would emerge in nine months would be a monster, not anything recognizably human at all.

One can, of course, say that "democratic centralism," or at least the centralism part of it, is a necessary part of the functioning of any voluntary group, and to the degree the group is democratic, then it is "democratic centralist." For example, union members vote on a contract and if the majority approves, then the contract is accepted, and it applies to all. A girl scout troop sells cookies and if the majority votes to use the money to travel to some event, rather than buy new uniforms, that's the way it is.

But if this is all that is involved in what is being put to us by the "Refounding Solidarity" comrades, then it is bizarre to appeal to the Communist and Trotskyist tradition.

That tradition has associated with it a plethora of intellectual strait-jackets, gag rules, norms about when freedom of speech is in order (for a couple of months every couple of years, at least in theory!) and not in order (the rest of the time), and demonstrated inability to contain even minor differences within an organization.

The specifically Trotskyist side of it has been plagued by splits, expulsions and the multiplication of sects, things which have degenerated more than once into spying on comrades, using other police-state tactics, goon squads and in the case of the Stalinists even murder.

And there is no basis for separating the specifically Trotskyist tradition from the rest of it. History has shown that there is as little room even in the "healthiest" Trotskyist Leninist Party for a diversity of views as there is among the pro-Moscow Stalinists or Maoists, or as close to as makes no serious difference.

I always remember one recurring type of incident from my days in the SWP leadership that symbolizes for me one of the biggest problems with what's come to be called Leninism. And that is when some big development would take place, and younger comrades --and disproportionately women comrades-- would ask me what "we" thought of it. It happened time and again, around the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, the overthrow of the Grenadian revolutionary government by the Coard faction (yes, in the name of "democratic centralism") the Peruvian embassy "crisis" in Cuba and the subsequent Mariel boatlift, the Iranian Revolution. What do "we" think of it. That was the question. Acceptance of whatever truth was about to be revealed was assumed, automatic, unquestioned.

Moreover, left groups --especially, it seems, from the Trotskyist tradition, but not just-- seem to have analyzed just about every conceivable political and social phenomenon save one: the marked tendency of "Leninism" as it has been handed down to us to produce splinters, sects and cults which rival even the most bizarre religions in their outlandishness.

The cult of the organization

Where does this come from? I believe it comes from the cult of the organization, of "The Leninist Party," which is not just a question of how a group describes itself but of its social and political practice, how it relates to the political environment around it.

Even organizations that specifically and consciously disclaim being "the vanguard" and so on display in their interactions with other groups on the left and social/mass movement organizations, as well as through their obsessive self-absorption and in-groupishness, that they are infected with the vanguardist virus. Theirs is a Copernican system with --oh happy coincidence-- their particular group as the sun at the center of it. And it becomes especially comical when you hear the comrades maintain that theirs is a really good group *because* they don't have vanguardist pretensions.

However, the reality is that they may have recognized, in theory, that they're not "the" vanguard,

but their practice continues to be infused with a vanguardist spirit, and especially in their relations to social movement-type organizations.

That the relationships are in fact hierarchical, conceived of as between "higher" or "more advanced" forms or levels of organization and the rest, rather than horizontal, can be easily demonstrated.

Vanguardist practice

The (in this case) supposedly "non vanguardist" democratic-centralist group accesses in an unrestricted way the internal affairs of other organizations. For the "democratic centralist" group, every intimate detail of the life and discussions of other organizations is an open book to it, but any inquiry, sometimes even for the most trivial detail of the life of the democratic centralist group will be rebuffed. That is what I mean by a hierarchical relationship and that is at the heart of the Comintern-Zinovievist "democratic centralist" tradition, that is what makes it *different* from the "democratic centralism" of, for example, a chess club.

[I want to point out that obviously this has a relation with my idea posted to the NC list a few months back for an open pre-convention discussion, and report that I've sent the convention planning committee a proposal along these lines, and will send it or whatever variant emerges from the process to the whole NC at least a couple of weeks before our upcoming meeting so comrades have a chance to think about it before possibly being asked to vote on it.]

One of the surprising and pleasant discoveries I've made about Solidarity in the few years that I have been a member is that it respects the autonomy and organizational integrity of the other groups its members participate in. In the year I was assigned to the Political Committee, not once did we receive a report from Chris K. about the internal affairs of a publication he works with, nor David F. about discussions or divisions in the ATC editorial Board, nor from (in the months she was on the PC with me), from Theresa on the board meetings of an anticrac network she helps to organize.

I say I was surprised not because I had any conscious expectation in this regard when I joined Solidarity, I'm pretty sure I hadn't focused on it on that level of organization functioning. But it is an important thing to keep in mind, for it is the antitheses of the specifically Zinovievist or Cominternist "democratic centralism," what the "Refounding Solidarity" group calls "the tradition of the communist and Trotskyist movements."

As some comrades can probably tell, the "refounding solidarity" grouping is essentially the "Twenty is Enough" caucus that came together around the time of the last convention and whose members started functioning as an organized caucus in the NC and perhaps other places (the summer school planning?) following that convention.

I withdrew from it when it turned out that I had a sharply different idea of how the caucus should function in relation to Solidarity as a whole in terms of openness and transparency than the other comrades did. And I

believe this question of Zinovievist "democratic centralism" and the hierarchy of relations implicit in it was part of that differentiation.

I call it "Zinovievist" because Zinoviev was the Bolshevik leader most identified with codifying it and spreading the model on the "party of a new type" around the world as head of the Communist International, and also because it is baby-simple to demonstrate that, whatever it is that made the Bolsheviks a distinctive or unique party, it was not that it was built with a conscious model of a party of a new type in mind and in this sense Lenin's party wasn't a "Leninist" party.

Lenin and the 'party of a new type'

As an experiment, I googled "party of a new type" (the catch phrase is often attributed to Lenin) on marxists.org to try to find when he had said it and how he used it. I found dozens of references, especially in the prefaces and footnotes to Lenin's Collected Works, asserting that this or that passage was an example of Lenin explaining his original contribution of a "party of a new type" and also among a wide array of latter-day "Leninists," (in the U.S., for example, encompassing a spectrum from James P. Cannon to Carl Davidson.)

Yet Google found only *one* place where Lenin himself used the expression, in a letter to Alexandra Kollontai from mid-March 1917 as she was about to return to Russia. The main body of the letter is an outline of some of the main ideas of the April Theses, and a request that she acquaint several comrades with a draft of a set of theses about the political situation in Russia (which I assume was a draft of the April theses). The phrase occurs in a PS, which I quote in full:

P.S. I am afraid that there will now be an epidemic in Petersburg "simply" of excitement, without systematic work on a party of a new type. It must not be à la "Second International". Wider! Raise up new elements! Awaken a new initiative, new organisations in all sections, and prove to them that peace will be brought only by an armed Soviet of Workers' Deputies, if it takes power.

Lenin is talking about the situation in Russia a few days after the victory of the February Revolution and the removal of the monarchy. What is striking here is that the main things we associate with "a party of a new type" simply aren't part of Lenin's use of the phrase, his *only* use of it that I could find. Here clearly the contrast is with the party of the "old" type, and the text suggests to me what he means is one based on a narrow aristocracy of labor, an issue which Lenin had written on in previous months (see, for example, his article on "Imperialism and the Split in Socialism" written in October of 1916). He wanted the Bolsheviks to go out and organize and draw into the organization much broader layers of working people than previously. That's how I read it.

In the Stalinist Collected Works preface to "What is to be done?" the phrase "party of a new type" appears in quotation marks, as if it had been drawn from the text that follows. But it isn't there in Lenin's text. To make extra sure that some typo or trivial word change hadn't kept me from finding the reference, I downloaded and

searched the PDF version from marxists.org for the phrases "new type" "new kind" and a couple of other variants. Still nothing, but it did lead me to read what the introduction says, which is that Lenin's spiel about a "party of a new type" in WITBD "is the origin of Lenin's famous theory of the Party as 'vanguard of the proletariat.'" So I searched the PDF for that phrase. Yep, you guessed it. Despite the use of quotation marks by the authors of the introduction, I couldn't find that phrase or any similar one with the word "vanguard" in it in the pamphlet.

Googling "vanguard of the proletariat" on Marxists.org produced strikingly different results. There are a number of references by Lenin to the RSDLP or social democrats as the vanguard of the proletariat. As there are by Luxembourg, Kautsky, and others, from around the same time (1904-1908 in the references I saw, but I checked only a small fraction, only enough to satisfy myself that I could reliably and factually report that the idea that the revolutionary workers party is the "vanguard of the proletariat" was not at all an original one of Lenin's).

'Leninism' in the Communist Manifesto

And actually I knew this would be the result before doing the search because I know where Lenin got it, which is the same place where Kautsky and everyone else found it, and that is in the Manifesto of the Communist Party:

The Communists ... are on the one hand, practically, the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties of every country, that section which pushes forward all others; on the other hand, theoretically, they have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the lines of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement.

The idea of this special role of the communists in the broader working class movement comes, not from Lenin originally, but from Marx and Engels, and they were only modifying and updating concepts that were current among revolutionaries of their time and before them. But I must confess that my most favorite way of expressing the idea is the "from below" way that Marx and Engels chose -- "that section which pushes forward all others."

It is simply not true that Lenin set out with some plan for a "party of a new type," *just as* it is not true that Fidel in 1956 carried out the Granma expedition based on the idea that a guerrilla foco would gradually change subjective conditions in Cuba to make revolution possible, which is the theses Regis Debray presents in Revolution in the Revolution. The development of the Bolshevik Party and the July 26 Movement and their roles in the political lives of the two countries were very complex, multidimensional processes which were later reduced to two-dimensional caricatures.

I engage in this historical digression for a reason. And that is to demonstrate how little foundation there is for the claim that Lenin set about building a "party of a new type" after realizing there was a need for a "vanguard of

the proletariat." Lenin's idea was pretty much for a standard-issue Social Democratic party adapted to Russian conditions, which, like social democratic parties everywhere, would draw together the most advanced and conscious layers of the proletariat.

Now one very important thing to note about Marx and Engel's conception of the Communist Party as a leading force in the working class struggle is that this did not in the slightest cause them to hesitate in dissolving the organized expression of that party, the Communist League, only a few *weeks* after having written those lines in the Manifesto, when a revolution broke out in Germany.

Why Communist League dissolved

Engels explains it very straightforwardly in his article "On the History of the Communist League," simply as a function of political tasks. The old propaganda league was not suitable for the new conditions of Germany in revolution, a newspaper was a much better political instrument, so they wound up the underground League and founded the daily *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*.

Let me repeat the central concept *again*, because this "Leninist Party" and "democratic centralism" thing has become a religious fetish: organizational forms flow from concrete political tasks; they are not something that can be derived from first principles or adapted from some ideal model. That is the materialist, Marxist way to approach the question. That is the way Marx and Engels approached it and Lenin, too, despite everything that was written after 1917.

And if you look at "What is to be Done" and other writings of Lenin around that time on the organization question, you will see that rather than an almost-impenetrable exposition of a "party of a new type" which he never makes explicit, what you find there is a very straightforward discussion of how to organize as a function of political tasks. Organization as a function of concrete tasks, and not as the embodiment of some ideal form, is *precisely* how Lenin approached the question.

Many of us among the older generations of Soli members were part of "Leninist" organizations previously. I'm sure I'm not the only one who read *What Is To Be Done* and other writings trying to decipher just what the essence of "the Leninist Strategy of Party Building" consisted of and being befuddled and somewhat chagrined that I could not understand or really see what all these other comrades said was in these writings by Lenin, the master plan for the perfect party.

Lenin's 'democratic centralism' in practice

As for Lenin's "democratic centralism" as it was actually understood and practiced, remember that Zinoviev and Kamenev on the eve of October published an article opposing the insurrectionary course the Bolsheviks were on, and in fact breaking discipline outrageously by "outing" a Central Committee resolution which had not been published, the resolution to prepare and carry out an insurrection. Lenin denounced them as

scabs, and demanded that they be expelled, especially because they had done this in the non-party press.

Lenin's arguments are striking because he doesn't motivate the expulsion on the basis that a higher or special or different or "new type" of discipline is required in a revolutionary workers party: quite the contrary, his basic argument is that this is a violation of the discipline required in *any* workers organization, and rests his case almost exclusively on an analogy with a union that decides to prepare for a strike but keeps the exact nature of the action and its timing secret for tactical reasons.

He says a member of the union leadership who then "outs" the confidential decision by criticizing it in the bourgeois press is a scab, and that Zinoviev and Kamenev should be expelled for scabbing. It wasn't the *special* discipline of a "party of a new type" but the quite *ordinary* discipline of a workers organization preparing a surprise blow against the bosses that Lenin insisted was applicable.

But also notable is this: Lenin couldn't get a single other member of the Central Committee to support him on this, as far as I can determine. So engrained was the individual freedom of comrades to write and say what they thought that Lenin simply had to drop it, stop referring to "Mr. Zinoviev" and "Mr. Kamenev" as ex-comrades, and resume normal party and leadership collaboration with them.

Ex post facto template making

All this stuff about a distinctive Bolshevik "discipline" and "centralism" and so on that Lenin supposedly invented, and which all of us of a certain age were taught when we were young, were ex-post-facto attempts to turn the experience of the Bolsheviks and the Russian Revolution into a template for other parties, just as Che's and then a little later Debray's writings on guerrilla warfare as a strategy represented an attempt to do the same sort of thing with the Cuban experience.

That this would happen makes perfect sense. If you see a really successful strike, the first thing the practical trade-union militant is going to say is, "let's talk to those sisters and brothers to see how they put it together and do the same thing here." Of course. It is only natural for that to happen.

And all the more so in the situation in Europe as World War I was ending and just afterwards. Germany and other countries were rotten-ripe for revolution. All that was needed as a proletarian party that actually had the courage of its convictions, and Lenin and his friends did everything they could to turn the Comintern into a hothouse to force the maturation of such parties. Of course they did. If they had succeeded our historical discussions about that period today would include how Debs did as chairman of the first U.S. soviet government. They'd have to have been *crazy not* to try it.

All the comrades in the Russian leadership were involved, but the one most directly engaged wasn't Lenin, who was a little busy what with the civil war and the situation in Russia, and whose health was not good, but by, ironically, the "scab" Zinoviev.

That's where the "21 conditions" and all the rest of it come from. They bear roughly the same relation to the Russian Revolution as Regis Debray's little book, "Revolution in the Revolution" --which systematically presents the foquista variant of the guerrilla strategy, the one Che tried to apply in Bolivia-- did to the Cuban Revolution.

Except that the impact of what the Russians said and did was a thousand times greater, at the very least, than the impact of the Cubans. It was the dawn of the proletarian revolution, the beginning of the final conflict, and the guys who had actually *done* it were saying this was how to do it. The need for a Leninist Party became as unquestioned an article of faith as the class struggle itself for that generation of revolutionists and most of the succeeding ones.

'Too Russian'

The one Bolshevik leader who seemed to have a problem with at least the way this was being done was Lenin. In his next to last major public speech, having already suffered one stroke, with his health rapidly declining, he apologized to the delegates for only being able to take up a small part of what he had been assigned and would have wanted to discuss. Nevertheless, he considered the mistaken organizational norms being imposed on the parties of the Communist International important enough to include them in his report to the Fourth Congress in November of 1922, even though they had little relation to the immediate subject, which was "Five Years Of The Russian Revolution And The Prospects Of The World Revolution."

This is part of what he said:

At the Third Congress, in 1921, we adopted a resolution on the organisational structure of the Communist Parties and on the methods and content of their activities. The resolution is an excellent one, but it is almost entirely Russian, that is to say, everything in it is based on Russian conditions. This is its good point, but it is also its failing. It is its failing because I am sure that no foreigner can read it. I have read it again before saying this. In the first place, it is too long, containing fifty or more points. Foreigners are not usually able to read such things. Secondly, even if they read it, they will not understand it because it is too Russian. Not because it is written in Russian—it has been excellently translated into all languages—but because it is thoroughly imbued with the Russian spirit. And thirdly, if by way of exception some foreigner does understand it, he cannot carry it out. This is its third defect. I have talked with a few of the foreign delegates and hope to discuss matters in detail with a large number of delegates from different countries during the Congress, although I shall not take part in its proceedings, for unfortunately it is impossible for me to do that. I have the impression that we made a big mistake with this resolution....

What exactly Lenin meant and how he intended to follow up on this we will never know, he was silenced before he ever had an opportunity to return to the subject. But the passage is certainly suggestive. And perhaps the most suggestive sentence is that even if the comrades from other countries could understand

perfectly what they *ought* to do under the resolution, actually doing it was impossible.

We also know other things that were central concerns of Lenin in those waning days of his active political life, and may well have been related to his concerns about the Comintern's national parties.

One was the nationalities policy which was chauvinist, what we would call in U.S. terms "racist." Another and very much related to it was the state apparatus, which he described in this way in the very last article he ever wrote:

Our state apparatus is so deplorable, not to say wretched, that we must first think very carefully how to combat its defects, bearing in mind that these defects are rooted in the past, which, although it has been overthrown, has not yet been overcome, has not yet reached the stage of a culture, that has receded into the distant past. I say culture deliberately, because in these matters we can only regard as achieved what has become part and parcel of our culture, of our social life, our habits....

Let it be said in parentheses that we have bureaucrats in our Party offices as well as in Soviet offices.

This was not the first time that Lenin had addressed this subject. A few months earlier he had told the 11th party congress:

If we take Moscow with its 4,700 Communists in responsible positions, and if we take that huge bureaucratic machine, that gigantic heap, we must ask: who is directing whom? I doubt very much whether it can truthfully be said that the Communists are directing that heap. To tell the truth they are not directing, they are being directed.

This is a factor that is generally not taken into account in considering the political legacy of the early Comintern. We think of it as this institution that was being led by the party of luminaries like Lenin and Trotsky. But it was also a party that at that very moment, according to its central leader, was *succumbing* to a vastly *superior* culture, the monstrously *backward* feudal-bureaucratic culture of tsarism.

Medieval barbarism

That this is precisely what was involved is proved beyond any doubt by the medieval barbarism and obscurantism of this emerging bureaucratic regime once it became fully consolidated. And that this was the very antithesis of Bolshevism is quite materially demonstrated by the bureaucracy's felt need to murder the entire "old Bolshevik" layer in the mid-1930s.

So that almost from the first, what people like James P. Cannon, Max Schachtman and other founding leaders of the specifically Trotskyist movement learned wasn't the "pure" oversimplification of the Russian experience, but one already corrupted by what was in essence the tendency of the consolidating bureaucratic caste (although in this case it matters little to this argument whether you consider it a caste, class or something else) to shut down all independent political thought, freedom of speech and organization, etc., so that its usurpation would not be challenged.

That is why the appeal to return to the real, good, true "democratic centralism" of the Communist and Trotskyist tradition is mistaken. There is no such from the Comintern forward, in part because it was, from the outset, a two-dimensional caricature of a multidimensional process, and in part because from very early on, and increasingly in the very early 20's, it was already combined with problems emerging from the growing bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet revolutionary process and how these then found expression even within the Bolshevik Party and its leadership.

You can see that clearly enough if you read Lenin's Testament, dictated a few weeks after the report to the Comintern Congress that I quoted from, and his slamming Trotsky for being arrogant and too concerned with purely administrative matters and Stalin for his rudeness (in separate notes, Lenin also takes up the Georgian's Great Russian chauvinism).

What this means is you have to go straight back to the source, to the original Bolshevik experience before the seizure of power to find the "pure," uncontaminated and un-oversimplified "Leninism" and "Democratic Centralism."

But when you try, you find things like a letter in English by Lenin to the secretary of the U.S. Socialist Propaganda League:

We defend always in our press the democracy in the party. But we never speak against the centralization of the party. We are for the democratic centralism. We say that the centralization of the German Labor movement is not a feeble but a strong and good feature of it. The vice of the present Social-Democratic Party of Germany consists not in the centralization but in the preponderance of the opportunists, which should be excluded from the party especially now after their treacherous conduct in the war.

The LCW says the letter was written no later than November, 1915, but apparently this is a mistake, as the group he addresses had not yet been organized and it is from a year later. No matter. Either way, it shows that at this late date Lenin drew no sharp differentiation (never mind proclaiming a "party of a new type") between Bolshevism and the parties of the second international on the *forms* or principles of organization. The differentiation was about the *politics*.

Lenin had no special 'theory' of organization

The idea that the Bolsheviks and the Internationalists should construct parties "of a new type" isn't just absent, it is inconsistent with what Lenin writes. Lenin did not believe he had a special theory of organization at all before the seizure of power.

Contrast that with what we have been taught, for example, SWP (US) founder James P. Cannon's article commemorating the 50th anniversary of the October revolution:

The greatest contribution to the arsenal of Marxism since the death of Engels in 1895 was Lenin's conception of the vanguard party as the organiser and director of the proletarian revolution. That celebrated theory of organisation was not, as

some contend, simply a product of the special Russian conditions of his time and restricted to them. It is deep-rooted in two of the weightiest realities of the 20th century: the actuality of the workers' struggle for the conquest of power, and the necessity of creating a leadership capable of carrying it through to the end.

So unquestioned was it that this is what Lenin did that Cannon doesn't even *try* to make this case. He takes it for *granted* that, in his audience, everyone understands at least this much, that this is really what Lenin was about, and goes from there.

But you would be hard-pressed to find anywhere in Lenin's writings before October (and perhaps even afterwards) where he makes any such claim or any statements that can reasonably be interpreted to say he had a specific organizational theory that *he* viewed as new or unique.

The differences were political not organizational

The differences between him and the central leaders of German Social Democracy as far as he was concerned were political: he was interested in making a revolution and they were not. There are organizational implications that flow from this, of course, because organization is a function of concrete political tasks.

That is why also it is incorrect to point to the post-1917 Bolsheviks as the "real" Leninist model. The political tasks and demands placed on a party with state power, especially in the midst of a civil war, are very, very far removed from our situation, although in fact this is largely what happened, it was the post-1917 party that Comintern sections were modeled on, not the pre-1917 party.

Thus, for example, the tradition of "internal" discussion bulletins, large central committees with politburos above them. Until 1917 there was no Bolshevik DB, political questions were debated openly in the press (which is why Kamenev and Zinoviev got away with what they did in October 1917), and the central committee varied from a half dozen to a dozen people until shortly before October, with no smaller body delegated its powers.

So, there is no magic bullet, there is no secret sauce, there is no ritual incantation, there is no patented ingredient, there is no special formula from which answers to "the organization question" can be derived. The "Leninist Party" as a distinctive contribution that Lenin made to Marxism is a *myth*, and the specifically "Leninist" democratic centralism is what caused immense problems and proved wanting in the XXth Century.

What we can say is that how revolutionaries organize themselves is a function of the concrete political tasks and the circumstances that they find themselves in.

And, lest we forget, perhaps the most extraordinarily successful form of revolutionary organization that the world has ever been seen, judging by its impact, was not the Bolshevik Party.

It was ... a friendship. That between Marx and Engels.
Atlanta, November 7, 2005