

Marxism and the Spartacist League

The Spartacist League is notorious in the petty bourgeois leftwing milieu. Its polemics have challenged much of the cliqueness and pseudo revolutionary bullshit there. Whilst groups in this environment have had differences often there has been a diplomatic arrangement to differ. The Spartacist League hoped to challenge this through tough rhetoric, attempting to "split and fuse" the subjective revolutionary elements there. They have been greeted with hostility - more a reflection against the Left than it is against the Spartacist League. Differences are very important to revolutionary strategy.

However, the Spartacist approach is not Marxist. The Spartacist League emerged out of the Schactmanite movement in the United States. On the brink of the Second World War a middle class clique in the U.S. section of the Socialist Workers' Party led by Max Shactman, James Burnham and Martin Abern deserted the then revolutionary Fourth International. Their split was a capitulation to bourgeois public opinion which had recoiled with horror when the armies of the Soviet Union invaded the Baltic States, expropriating their economies under the gun and then invaded Finland (where they were defeated). This middle class section, strongly based in New York, declared that the defense of the Soviet Union under these circumstances did not correspond to the "reality of living events". Their defense of the Soviet Union was qualified - they would defend a "if the imperialists assail the Soviet Union with the aim of crushing [it]."

The majority, led by Trotsky, pointed out that the Finish army represented the imperialists and that all the hue and cry about "poor little Finland" was a cover for the imperialist war drive against the Soviet Union. For Trotsky, the militant stand to take during the Russo-Finish war was determined by the class character "of the states involved. It was from class characteristics that communists standpoint on concrete politics was determined. Primary in his consideration is Marxist method" The concrete is a combination of abstractions "Not only did he apply this method to the USSR, he also applied it to the Burnham/Schactman opposition Their opposition to dialectical materialism and class criteria was a reflection of their material class interest – that of the petty bourgeoisie as opposed to that of the proletariat.. This was the fundamental question in the dispute far more significant than "concrete political questions" When asked "In your opinion were there enough political differences to warrant a split?"

He replied as follows

"Here it is also necessary to consider the question dialectically, not mechanically. What does this terrible word "dialectics" mean? It means to consider things in their development, not in their static situation. If we take the political differences as they are, we can say they were not sufficient for a split, but if they developed a tendency to turn away from the proletariat in the direction of petty-bourgeois circles, then the same differences can have an absolutely different value; a different weight; if they are connected with a different social group. This is a very important "

The Spartacist League broke from the Schactmanites when it became clear they were heading off to the right (they ended up in the US Democrats) . They joined the Socialist Workers Party which was in alliance with the Socialist Labour League of England led by Gerry Healy and the OCI led by Lambert in France. They were fighting the liquidation of Trotskyism into Stalinism and left nationalist organisations. Castro's victory in Cuba exposed the shallowness of their break from Pabloite liquidation. They discovered that Castro was an "unconscious Trotskyist" (he was and is a Stalinist) and began to reunite with the majority which considered itself the continuity of Trotsky's Fourth International (the United Secretariat). Healy and Lambert had more serious intentions as had the ex-Schactmanites in the SWP. They formed a political tendency within the SWP and were eventually bureaucratically expelled. A split occurred on whether Cuba was, as Healy saw it "state capitalist". Those who became the Spartacist League rejected this.

Whilst the contact with the S.W.P. and Healy's International Committee has been influential, the formative influence on the S.L. has been the Schactmanite tendency. Revolutionary currents could emerge out of this the -Spartacist League. What is missing is a marxist analysis of Schactmanism, without which a complete break cannot be made. They have not only not made such an analysis, their whole method is permeated with Schactmanism. The Spartacist League's critical difference with Schactman was the dispute over the question of unconditional defence of the Soviet Union. What they ignore is the whole class character of the dispute. Trotsky dialectically linked the struggle on concrete political questions with the proletarianisation of the party. The more petty bourgeois it was in social composition, the more susceptible it was to bourgeois public

opinion. He warned that the S.W.P. should become proletarianised and proposed drastic measures to ensure this, including suspending or expelling members who could not recruit workers.

For the Spartacist League this was "workerism". They see cadre as a declassed abstraction to the extent of arguing:

"I think it was Leon Day (a member of the SLUS) in the Ellens' dispute documents (a faction fight against syndicalists) who said that if he could turn monkeys into revolutionaries he would be at the zoo every afternoon with a handful of peanuts." [Letter, Bill Logan to Owen Gager, 14-11-71].

This makes a monkey out of Marxism. The Spartacist League should be ashamed of Leon Day (or whoever said it), yet he is quoted with authority by someone who was to become a leader of the tendency in a faction fight which they recognise as important in establishing their tendency internationally (despite Logan's subsequent expulsion in disgrace).

What the Spartacist League is effectively defending is the petty bourgeois character of both themselves and the revisionist left. Their method of struggle is idealist: a group of middle class comrades who understand both revolutionary politics and dialectic materialism are better than a group of working class ones who don't. But they are only better insofar as they can link themselves to the working class. Whilst those who defect from their privileged positions must be welcomed, we can't be oblivious to their origins. To see cadre as being independent of class character in terms of composition, is a fundamental piece of revisionism and a sure recipe for political degeneration.

The Spartacist League has rejected the Third Camp of Shachtman -- they defend the Soviet Union against imperialism - but they have not broken from the theory of camps. They see the whole world through the perspective of defense of the Soviet Union and Vietnam. They effectively write off China because of its "alliance with U.S. imperialism". What is seen as crucial is not the class character of the Chinese state but the alliances made by their bureaucrats. Just as Shachtman wrote off the USSR because of an alliance with Hitler, the class. Whilst those who defect from their privileged positions must be welcomed, we can't be oblivious to their origins. To see cadre as being independent of class character in terms of composition, is a fundamental piece of revisionism and a sure recipe for political degeneration.

The Spartacist League have rejected the Third Camp of Schactman - they defend the Soviet Union against imperialism - but they have not broken from the theory of camps. They see the whole world through the perspective of defence of the Soviet Union and Vietnam. They effectively write off China because of its "alliance with U.S. imperialism". What is seen as crucial is not the class character of the Chinese state but the alliances made by their bureaucrats. Just as Schactman wrote off the USSR because of an alliance with Hitler, the Spartacists write off millions of Chinese workers and peasants. In fact, the Soviet Union/Vietnam, are defended even to the extent of supporting the bureaucrats declaring war!

When Vietnam invaded Kampuchea and China responded by border incursions against Vietnam, the Spartacists demanded "USSR HONOUR YOUR TREATY TO VIETNAM". The treaty concerned was military, so what the Spartacists were demanding was war between the two states, which they have acknowledged have broken from capitalism. The result, had the Stalinists listened, would have been devastating. This is one of the most counter-revolutionary demands ever made in the name of Trotskyism.

Trotsky rejected the whole theory of blocks and camps outright:

"the school boy schema of three camps leaves out a trifling detail: the colonial world, the greater proportion of mankind".

They are succinctly expressed as follows:

"[A]ll nationalism is reactionary and expresses the genocidal and expansionist appetite of all national bourgeoisie". **Australian Spartacist**, Feb. 1975 (our emphasis).

The context of the quotation is an article on Palestine. For Trotsky, the contrary held - the nationalism in the colonies was a progressive but bourgeois movement. In his article **Prospects and Tasks in the East** (1923) he argues that because of its progressive nature there was the danger of liquidation. For example, liquidation into the Chinese Nationalist party Kuo Min Tang (something which he opposed).

In response to the Indo-Chinese Trotskyists, Trotsky corrects their Manifesto:

"On page four there is a statement that nationalism which at all times has been a reactionary ideology, can only forge new chains for the working class. Here nationalism is taken as a transcendental suprahistorical idea that always remains reactionary. This is neither a historical or dialectical way of posing the question and it opens the door for incorrect conclusions. Nationalism has not always been a reactionary ideology, not by far, and it's not always one today either. Can it be said that the nationalism of the great French Revolution was a reactionary force in the struggle against feudal Europe? By no means. The nationalism of the most backward peasant directed against French imperialism is a progressive element as opposed to the abstract and false cosmopolitanism of the Freemasons. The proletariat does not have the right to turn its back on this kind of nationalism. On the contrary, it must demonstrate that it is a most consistent and devoted fighter for national liberation of Indo-China". **[Writing (30-31) p.30. 31.1**

How does the Spartacist League respond on the national question on concrete circumstances? An examination reveals a record of betrayal.

Ireland

In 1921 Britain divided Ireland into two. The Southern twenty-six were given formal (in reality, limited) independence and dominion status. The Northern six counties remain militarily and politically under British control. In the Northern six counties, the majority are Protestant, but a significant minority are Catholic. Economically and politically the Protestants are privileged. They identify with the British Empire and are called loyalists. The Catholic minority face discrimination in employment, wages, housing and services.

In 1923, Trotsky pointed out that any communist who did not support the Irish struggle should be branded with infamy, if not the bullet. Undoubtedly, the Spartacists would claim to identify with this statement but point out that Trotsky would not have been aware of the consequences of the partition. This, according to them, changes things. The S.L. opposed the troops sent there by Harold Wilson's Labour Government in 1969. They are against "forced unification until socialist revolution". In effect, they are saying that whilst they advocate socialist revolution, imperialism is more progressive than any bourgeois opposition, i.e. the IRA. The SL claim to defend the IRA but this defense is purely passive. What they don't advocate is its military victory. They are refusing to take a stand in an existing war and giving imperialism covert support "until socialist revolution".

South Africa

The Spartacist League have argued recently that white South Africans "don't have a right to oppress", but "do have a right to exist". Who's denying the right to exist? Both the bourgeois nationalist organisations, the A.N.C. and the P.A.C. call for a multi-racial bourgeois democratic Azania with a mixed economy. This programme can't defeat the apartheid state. The task of revolutionaries is to win maximum support for the military struggle of the black people. By raising the prospect that the right to exist of white working class people might be threatened, the SL is buying into imperialist propaganda. It is precisely this fear it tries to instil into white working class people to stop them supporting the blacks.

The Falklands

Their two camp world outlook has created a wrong position on the war between Britain and Argentina over the Malvinas (Falkland) Islands. The Spartacist slogan was "REAGANS FRIENDS AT WAR" and because both General Galtieri of Argentina and Margaret Thatcher of Britain were Reagan's allies in the cold war, deduced "revolutionary defeatism for both sides".

Britain is an imperialist power with massive investments in South America. To defend those investments, Britain has promoted reactionary dictatorships and has had a military presence. The Malvinas has been an

important military base for maintaining imperialist control. Irrespective of motivations, General Galtieri's attempt to remove this reactionary imperialist outpost is progressive. We must be critical of his inability to do this consistently. We must be revolutionary defeatist towards Britain and revolutionary defencist from the point of view of Argentina. For revolutionaries it is our duty to defend a semi-colony from an imperialist power. Our stand is not determined by any alliance the rulers of the semi-colony make.

El Salvador and the Carribean

For El Salvador, the key Spartacist slogan was -THE DEFENCE OF THE SOVIET UNION BEGINS IN EL SALVADOR". US imperialism has an interest in defeating the guerillas because of the threat to its imperialist domination of Latin America. It uses the "Soviet threat" to cover for this domination. The Spartacist League effectively invert US imperialist rhetoric to stand with the USSR. What would happen if the defence of a colonial struggle did not coincide with the defence of the USSR? Take as an example of Grenada, a Caribbean Island which the US invaded . The SL called for "TROOPS out DEAD OR ALIVE" but argued that to focus attention on Grenada meant to divert from the main thrust of the "anti- Soviet cold war drive ", which was then centred on the Lebanon. *US imperialism should be opposed every-where*. The issues at stake with Grenada were more than just one island. The US was using the invasion to maintain its discipline over the Caribbean. Once again the two camp view of the world sells out.

Incidentally, the debate they had with their estranged comrades, the Bolshevik Tendency over whether troops in Lebanon or Grenada should be out, alive or dead, was somewhat of a red herring. For revolutionaries troops can only get out by being military defeated or by revolutionary defeatism (turning the guns against their officers) or by the threat of revolutionary working class mobilisation. Revolutionaries do not advocate unnecessary loss of life, but by all of these means there is a danger of blood being spilt.

Kampuchea

The two camp theory of the world leads to Stalinism. The Spartacists call for a war between the Soviet Union and China has been mentioned. They have been apologists for the Vietnamese Stalinist bureaucracy as well. They held a demo once, demanding "POL POT OUT OF THE UN". No communist should have anything to do with what Lenin called a "thieves' picnic" yet the demo called for the recognition of the Vietnam-backed Heng Samrin! The 1988 September issue of the **Australian Spartacist** is lavish in its praise of the Vietnam Invasion yet it turned a blind eye to the real threat of capitalist restoration which comes both from Pol Pot and the Vietnamese sponsored regime. Since 1979 the Vietnamese have supported a market economy, a stock exchange, free elections and any government so long as it excludes Pol Pot. In other words, they threaten to restore capitalism.

Afghanistan

The Spartacist League hailed the Red Army in Afghanistan. Revolutionary communists give their Moslem guerrilla opponents no support whatsoever. The Red Army has discredited the name of communism by propping up one wing of the ruling elite. The Communist Tendency does not call for withdrawal, it calls for unity between Afghan proletarians and proletarians in the Red Army for revolution . The Spartacists have not thought about revolution *except* in terms of the capitalist regime propped up by the Stalinists or the guerrillas backed by imperialism.

Poland

Another notable Spartacist League convergence with Stalinism is reflected in its attitude to the Polish trade union Solidarnosc (Solidarity). Understandably, the working class of Poland were angry at the enforced austerity brought about by Poland's expanding foreign debt and bureaucratic inefficiency. Their leadership's programme was, and is, reactionary and utopian. Walesa has had illusions about collaborating both with foreign imperialists and with the Stalinist bureaucracy. Solidarnosc has to be fought.

For the Spartacist League, this means giving military support to the bureaucracy to smash it down. When there was the threat of Soviet invasion it opposed "violence directed against soldiers or officers [which] would sabotage the proletarian cause ". The working class in Poland was not armed. What the Spartacists demanded

was Polish state repression of the working class. Events in Poland have shown that the imperialists distrust the working class, even when led by the reactionaries. It is an abomination of Marxism to argue that the organised working class could, in power, create an alien social system. The most probable outcome of a bid for power would be a split. We want a split so as to create a healthy Polish workers' movement to create political revolution. We can't support that movement being crushed by bureaucrats.

It isn't surprising that the Spartacist League honoured the death of Stalinist bureaucrat Andropov with such guarded compliments as "he curbed the excess of the bureaucracy" he made no overt betrayals to Imperialism...he sought to increase productivity." Andropov deserves no honour apart from being regarded as a counter-revolutionary bureaucrat. He sought to increase productivity. And, he also increased discipline over the working class. As for making no overt betrayals to imperialism, the fact that he wasn't involved in a sell-out of the magnitude of the Spanish Revolution was more because of lack of historical opportunity.

The Spartacist League two camp view of politics is also relevant when it comes to the Labour Party. In the seventies the SL position was determined by economism. It considered Labour would always be working class because of the affiliation of trade unions and because workers saw it as their party. In the eighties the SL withdrew critical support because Labour was party to the anti-Soviet cold war drive. Before the Second World War, Trotsky argued for critical support to Labour in Britain "because it represents the working masses ", despite the fact that Labour was party to the imperialist war. Whether or not critical support is given to Labour is determined by the relationship of the working class to it. Labour was formed out of the trade union movement, but, as Lenin showed, lending the economic struggle a political character meant political subordination of the working class to the petty bourgeoisie. This had happened in practice. There has been a process of degeneration of the Labour Party in Australia and elsewhere, which has meant more and more working class people have been excluded from "their" party. Under some circumstances both criticism and critical support are appropriate tactics, but it is criminal to reinforce a bankrupt party precisely when the working class are deserting it.

Another feature of note is their economism, its refusal to understand the distinction between trade union and political struggle. For it, trade unions leaderships *are* the leadership of the working class. In **Revolutionary Communist** Bulletin No.2, Joseph Seymour argues as follows:

"Jesson's article perpetuates the myth that trade unions are simply bargaining agents for particular groups of workers and are inherently political. While this may [have been] true in the nineteenth century when labour unions were weak, defensive organisations, it is not true now. In all advanced capitalist countries, in particular, countries like New Zealand, which have mass social-democratic parties, trade unions exercise considerable influence in all aspects of political life. The task is not, as Jesson contends, to divert the economic struggle to a political struggle, it is to overthrow the conservative and reformist bureaucracy and pursue a revolutionary policy on both the industrial and political level. To assert that trade unions are inherently parochial and economist organisations is undialectical. To say that unions as such (i.e. as bargaining agencies for particular groups of workers) cannot be revolutionary is tautology. The point is that unions can give birth to other forms of organisation (e.g. parties, general strike committees, workers' councils) and can provide the structure for workers' insurrection."

Bruce Jesson was a member of the N.Z.S.L. and of the majority Gager wing. The expression "divert the economic struggle to a political struggle" comes not only from Jesson. It is Lenin's. Marx and Lenin are under attack. **Wages, Prices and Profit** is one of Marx's key works. He concluded:

"As to the limitation of the working day in England, as in all other countries it has never been settled except by legislative interference... but in all events the result would not have been achieved by private settlement between working man and capitalists. This very necessity of general political action affords the proof that in merely economic action capital is the stronger side."

Marx was not talking about a situation when unions had "little social power". Both Gager and Jesson saw the need to work in the trade unions. The point is that the dynamic of the existing struggle within trade unions is not revolutionary. The question of state power is avoided. It will be argued by some that when trade unions' picket lines are forced to confront the cops, the question of state power is posed. In his article, "A Third Period of Comintern Errors": **Writings** 1930, Trotsky attacks precisely this view as a betrayal:

"A political strike is not a strike in which communists carry out political agitation but a strike in which workers of all occupations and plants conduct a struggle for definite political aims. Revolutionary agitation on the basis of strikes is a task under all circumstances: but the participation of the workers is political, that is revolutionary strikes, is one of the most advanced form of struggle and occurs only under exceptional circumstances. The identification of trade union strikes with political strikes causes confusion which prevents trade union leaders from correctly approaching economic demands."

In the LaTrobe Valley, the Spartacist League argued "like Hawke, the so-called communist John Halfpenny argued that this strike is not 'political'. Halfpenny lies. *The Age* and the *Financial Review* at least know the truth. They know that the \$40 wage claim is a direct challenge to the indexation wage freeze and the government policy of cutting real wages"

SL leaflet Reject the Sellout

A strike for a forty dollar wage rise is a trade union struggle. Of course, what politics can fight for trade union demands is a vital question. However in no way were the power workers fighting for a generalized demand which could have covered the whole of the working class. It was a demand which could have been incorporated in a trade union award. This is one of the most overt cases of SL economism but it is not the only one. Against fascism the Spartacists call for trade union defense guards to acquaint the fascists with the pavement.

Of course no revolutionary can oppose this. However, it is simply not good enough. Whereas communism is revolutionary hope, fascism is petty bourgeois despair. To defeat fascism it is necessary to have a political programme to win the petty bourgeoisie over to the proletarian vanguard. Import controls and all forms of racism must be consistently fought. If politically the balance of forces is on our side, then the physical struggle is easier to win.

In Queensland where the SEQEB power workers were under attack, the Spartacist League called for consistent picket line action, a break from the ALP and the trade union bureaucrats and the prices and incomes accord. The Communist Left (Communist Tendency is in continuity) argued that the weakness of the working class was due to the strength of multinational capital and a strong rural sector of the economy. Farmers gravitate to whoever is politically strongest. Due to a politically weak working class subordinated to the system and due to a failure to show that problems they face such as mortgages can only be resolved by fighting for proletarian power.

Spartacist League perspective was consistent unionism, the Communist Left perspective was revolutionary communism.

Given that the Spartacist League is revisionist on the national question and is economist, it is no accident that it revises Lenin's analysis of the labour aristocracy. For the Spartacist League, the term is virtually equivalent to a labour bureaucracy. Lenin showed that sections of the working class were bribed by imperialist superprofits. He quotes Engels:

"There are no workers' parties here, only Conservatives and Liberal/Radicals and the workers gaily share the feast of England's monopoly of the world market and the colonies."

Spartacist League leader, D. Strachan, even denies that the Protestant workers in Ireland are a labour aristocracy!

This article is not a complete critique of the Spartacist League. There are many areas of difference not dealt with (such as the Kerr Coup, Iran, whether Black Land Rights are equivalent to Bantustans in South Africa!) Its purpose is merely to analyse the main trends that constitute Spartacist revisionism. Whilst the Gager-Logan dispute has been referred to, a proper assessment is beyond the scope of this article. Although Gager's stand contained error and exaggerations, he was orthodox on key political questions. The Spartacist League has been thoroughly dishonest. He is accused of "arming the people ... against the Trade Union Movement". These quotes are torn out of context. By arming of the people, Gager meant the working class and its allies. Gager

was "against the Trade Union Movement" from the point of view of counter-posing a political party. The two quotes together as presented by Spartacist make him appear a union smasher. Using the same analogy, one could falsify them by pointing out that they stood for "arming the workers against the independent women's movement". No! The Spartacist League absolutely does not stand for shooting down the women's movement, but this is just the sort of falsification this school of quotation-addition can lead to.

The Spartacist League is an ex-Shactmanite sect who are converging with Stalinism, liquidating into the trade union struggle and adapting to chauvinism. No doubt their tough rhetoric and organisational presence will make them a pole of attraction which will appeal to some people. But constructing a Marxist tradition they are not.

Communist Left (Australia) 1989