

# **Problems**

**of communist organisation**

**Jack Conrad**

Workers of the world, unite!

**Dedicated to Ted Rowlands:  
An old Bolshevik who, even when  
his Party deserted him, never deserted  
the Party**

**Jack Conrad**

**Problems of  
communist  
organisation**

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# Introduction

*Party struggles lend a party strength and vitality; the greatest proof of a party's weakness is its diffuseness and the blurring of clear demarcations; the party becomes stronger by purging itself*  
(Lassalle to Marx, June 24 1852)

Members of the Communist Party were from July to September 1993 consumed in a fierce discussion on the issue of democratic centralism. During the course of debate a minority emerged which claimed that our organisation was dominated by a bureaucratic regime. The majority rejected this attack and insisted on the contrary that we practice and are developing the most healthy democratic centralism.

It is futile now to regret intemperate utterances, bad formulations and hurt feelings. As is natural, both sides targeted what they thought were their opponents crasser statements and most vulnerable points. Nevertheless for us a serious fight was carried through which enabled the majority to clarify many problems that exist around the question of democratic centralism and flush out weak, unstable elements. That has enabled us to bring into sharper focus the fight to reforge the Communist Party of Great Britain and thus become stronger.

As the reader will find, I not only expose the mistakes and hypocrisy of our lightweight (both in terms of commitment and numbers) minority, but also explore the theory of proletarian organisation, the positions of Leninism as against opportunism, the proletarian philosophy as against formalism and scholasticism. Because of this, class conscious workers can, through careful study of what was in contention, learn a great deal from the struggle we have conducted over democratic centralism – a struggle that will undoubtedly have a significance for many years ahead.

For reasons, I willingly confess, more to do with supplying necessary information than philanthropic fairness, we publish not only the views of the majority, but the minority as well. Opponents of communism will of course sneer, lay hold of minority polemical passages about immanent bureaucracy, show trials or restrictions on democracy to 'prove' that not even Leninists can achieve the unity necessary to reforge the CPGB. There is no need to worry ourselves overmuch with such people and their ill-advised malevolence. We Leninists have been steeled in over a decade of ideological battle and political combat. Let our opponents publish the debates and disagreements within their own 'parties'. They dare not. Without hesitation, we do.

*JC*

September 1 1993



# 1. Democratic centralism

In his ground breaking and now renowned pamphlet *What is to be done?*, written in 1902, Lenin argued for the highly centralised proletarian Party. He systematically and ruthlessly attacked the you-do-what-you-please association of intellectuals or the Labourite type party then being peddled by ‘democratic’ opportunists. Though a number of his proposals were specific to Russia under the Tzars, the Communist Party, the Bolshevik *party of the new type*, proved universally applicable. Proletarian revolution is national in form but in content it is international. Russia was the world’s revolutionary centre, which, as such, held up a mirror of what was to come and what was necessary everywhere. And as Marx said, what is necessary inevitably becomes real.

Following the October 1917 revolution communist parties were formed throughout the world, including, in July 1920, in the “most bourgeois of nations”, Great Britain. On the basis of the Bolshevik model, the rules of the Communist Party of Great Britain stated that not only are members required to accept its programme, but regularly pay dues and *work actively* in one of its organisations under a *single* leadership. A vital *socio-political* fact. For in its struggle for power, the working class has “no other weapon but organisation”.<sup>1</sup> The Communist Party is indisputably the most powerful weapon the working class can have, the highest form of organisation it can achieve. Strict centralisation makes the Communist Party more than a sum of its parts. As is well known to even the most stupid populist journalist, because it operates as one, the strength of the Communist Party is fifty, a hundred times greater than its membership figures would suggest. That is why through the political leadership of such a *vanguard* organisation the working class can take on and overcome the might of the capitalist state and establish a socialist society, the first stage of communism.

The Communist Party is a voluntary union of communists, ie the union of the most advanced members of the working class who have grasped the

need for the revolutionary theory of Marxism-Leninism. This theory is inseparable from the organisation of communists. The Party can only full its role as the vanguard of the working class when it combines revolutionary theory with the unity of action represented by its centralism. Organisation is, in other words, built upon unity around Marxist-Leninist theory. “Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement,” runs Lenin’s celebrated maxim. Because the Communist Party exists to provide the working class with the highest form of organisation and consciousness, it unites revolutionary theory with revolutionary practice. Communists cannot tolerate those who do not fully carry out agreed tasks, who make excuse after excuse, who confine their revolutionary enthusiasm to meeting room or pub room rhetoric. Members must act as one under a leadership which can change direction at a moment’s notice according to new circumstances. Achieving that means developing both independent minded, self-activating cadres and the theory of the whole Party. None of that can be arrived at by mechanical means such as arithmetic congress majorities or issuing leadership dictats. It requires the realisation of democratic centralism, a term first used by Lenin in December 1905 at the Bolshevik conference at Tammerfors. Democratic centralism is a fundamental organisational principle which comprises the dialectical (ie, the moving, developing, changing and interconnected) unity of democracy and centralism. To use a well known phrase, democratic centralism is required to ensure that members and organisations of the Communist Party not only act as one fist, but strike in the right direction. Acting as one means the subordination of the minority to the majority when it comes to the actions of the Party. To strike in the right direction means the fullest debate of theory, strategy, tactics and organisation.

Few debates result in instant clarity. Lengthy ideological struggle around different views are therefore an inevitable and healthy feature of Party life. That is why, in the Communist Party — unlike the practice of the Socialist Workers Party, Militant Labour and other opportunist organisations — minorities should not be gagged (eg, when the SWP came out with the old WRP slogan demanding the TUC gets off its knees and calls *the* general strike in 1992, there was no debate about this sudden mutation in its press; as to Militant, its founder-leader ended up using *The Guardian* to present his criticisms of the turn from deep entryism). Minorities must have the possibility of becoming the majority. As long as they accept *in practice* the decisions of the majority, groups of comrades

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have the right to support alternative platforms and form themselves into temporary or permanent factions. Hence democratic centralism represents a dialectical unity entailing the fullest, most open and frank debate along with the *most determined selfless revolutionary action*. Democratic centralism allows members of the Party to unitedly carry out actions, elect and be elected, criticise the mistakes of the Party and self-criticise their own failings without fear or favour. In essence then, democratic centralism is a process whereby communists are united around correct aims and principles.

Because of their *dialectical* understanding of democratic centralism, communists do not fetishise formal democracy. Obviously, in countries where capitalism rules using dictatorial methods, the Party has to operate illegally. That means many aspects of democracy have to be curbed. For example, appointment from above takes precedence over election from below. However, as Lenin and orthodox communism, as opposed to opportunism and centrism, made clear, if there is *trust* among comrades not even the most terroristic capitalist dictatorship can prevent the Communist Party operating freely among the masses and openly struggling for the correct aims and principles. Formal aspects of democracy cannot function. Yet as long as there is *open criticism and discussion* there is democratic centralism. In the communist press different ideas contend, criticisms are made and answered. Though, in other words, there might not be formal democracy, there is genuine democracy.

In a parliamentary democracy like Great Britain we Leninists argue that there is no need for the Communist Party to emphasise centralism as against formal aspects of democracy. The Party can, without too much difficulty, operate freely and publicly. That does not mean our Communist Party should have legalistic illusions. No matter where a Communist Party operates, it must combine legal with illegal work. Nevertheless, under such conditions, within the Party there is no need to curb democracy. There should be public meetings and debates, ease of joining the membership, election of leaders from below and regular congresses and conferences.

## 2. Bureaucratic centralism

Things originate from themselves and take on their different forms from the contours of their own logic. The morphology of our organisation has therefore not only to be seen in light of our aims, but movement from our origins towards our ultimate goal.

Though some innocents might think it irrelevant to our tasks today, it should never be forgotten that the opportunist cliques which used to dominate the CPGB claimed to operate democratic centralism. That was a big lie which discredited democratic centralism and communism itself. Their *British Road to Socialism* was a reformist, not a revolutionary, programme. Their concern was not arriving at revolutionary clarity but silencing all oppositionist forces. Minorities, above all the Leninist minority, had no access to 'official' Party publications, which were treated as factional or private property. Far from having the possibility of becoming the majority, the minority was denied places on leading committees proportional to its support and was subjected to a crude *bureaucratic* centralism which meant persecution and expulsion. Congresses might have been held every two years where a leadership was elected, but that did not mean we viewed them with equanimity.

Congress delegates cast their votes for a *representative* leadership; however, the leadership was representative of opportunism. To ensure that always remained the case, congresses were gerrymandered, stage managed affairs that atomised delegates into workshops, allowed leaders to speak for an hour but put a one minute limit on rank and file speeches. Such a state of affairs had nothing to do with unity in action. Most members were completely inactive and theoretically illiterate. What actions these 'official communists' wanted were not motivated by Marxism-Leninism, rather a craving for respectability in the eyes of bourgeois society.

### 3. Reforging the CPGB

From the very first our founding comrades stressed that the main political question in Britain was reorganising the CPGB – without the Communist Party there is no hope of socialism.<sup>2</sup> To achieve the aim of reorganising the CPGB they came together and in November 1981 began a principled and unremitting open ideological struggle. Principled, because there was nothing sectarian or narrow about the rebellion we led against the opportunists. They were wrecking the CPGB and betraying the working class. We Leninists were determined to re-equip the working class with a revolutionary programme and a disciplined, revolutionary Party. Unremitting, because that fight remains the sole reason why the Provisional Central Committee of the CPGB exists. Once the CPGB is reorganised, the PCC will hand over all its properties, records, presses, funds and other resources and dissolve itself.

For us, reorganising the CPGB is a political question. The Communist Party is by definition the organised vanguard part of the working class. Although it will almost certainly be necessary to build a Party of many millions to make revolution in a country like Britain, exactly when a reorganising congress of the CPGB is called depends on political not numerical criteria. Has the theoretical basis been laid for the communist programme? Have communist leaders been trained? Have roots been dug in the working class? Have advanced workers been won to communism? These questions tell us what we need to do in order to reforge the CPGB.

It was under the onerous conditions of bureaucratic centralism and cancerous liquidationism that the Leninist wing of the CPGB underwent the incredibly difficult process of organising itself in order to provide the political basis and the authoritative centre from which the Party could be reorganised. Bureaucratic centralism meant that to all intents and purposes we communists had to operate under illegal conditions. That did not mean there was no democratic centralism among us. There was always openness

in our publications. That created the ideological and organisational unity that enabled us to establish centralism and genuine democracy even though many formal aspects of democracy were lacking. Moreover, despite inauspicious circumstances, the Leninists of the CPGB have to date organised five conferences of communists (and, as these lines are written, are just about to have a sixth). Though participants were appointed from above because of the *trust* among comrades, they were respected as fully representative, authoritative and democratic. Besides electing a leading body of comrades, these conferences debated a wide range of motions. They were submitted by the leadership and individual comrades. Minorities have, if anything, found themselves over-represented, certainly not under-represented. There has never been any restriction on discussion or criticism. As long as discussion and criticism takes place on the basis of the principles of Marxism-Leninism, as long as it aims to develop the work of the Party, it helps strengthen centralism.

As well as a vigorous press, conferences organised round particular issues and controversies, an annual week-long school and monthly membership aggregates, the Leninists of the CPGB present weekly seminars in London where members, supporters and friends of the Party are able to debate theoretical questions, current events, Party activities and finances. There has always been a free and open atmosphere. We intend, and are beginning, to reproduce that pattern in other parts of the country as the Party re-establishes itself.

## 4. Our progress

Since we began our open ideological struggle in November 1981 there has been a profound turn in world and domestic politics. The working class has suffered huge defeats, crucially the 1984-85 Great Strike, the final liquidation of the CPGB and the collapse of bureaucratic socialism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union through the democratic counterrevolutions of 1989-91. The period of reaction this unleashed saw many opportunists drop all pretence of having anything to do with communism, weak elements scurrying off to seek individualistic solutions in career and private life, and the suffocating isolation of genuine communists. The whole political spectrum has moved to the right; even petty bourgeois leftists joined Thatcher and Major, Reagan and Bush in enthusiastically welcoming the “death of communism”. So, despite capitalism showing all the signs of pre-general crisis, bourgeois ideas are stronger than ever before. Nonetheless, though communists have had to swim against a tidal wave of reaction, we have made some advances. Recapturing the name of our Party, forming the Provisional Central Committee, standing CPGB candidates in the 1992 general election and the Newbury by-election, two trial relaunches of the *Daily Worker*, the establishment of the *Weekly Worker* and our role in support of the miners, Timex and other workers all testify to real progress.

That said, there remains a long way to go before we can reforge the CPGB. Party membership is tiny and mainly London based. Furthermore, though there is now a layer of carded-up supporters of the Party, most of them are not organised in branches and those that are operate on a very low level. However, taking into account our progress, crucially the fact that we are beginning to seriously organise outside London, the Provisional Central Committee of the CPGB considered that the time was ripe for a further, albeit modest, broadening and deepening of the democratic centralism of the organisation.

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Following the membership aggregate in July 1993, the Provisional Central Committee agreed the resolution *Democratic centralism and our strategy* in order to present comrades with a detailed thesis on the question (ie, in abstract form which discards supporting evidence or descriptive argument). Based on a wide ranging report delivered by comrade John Bridge, it outlined what we understand by democratic centralism, under what conditions we fought and developed it, and how we can now take it one step nearer our aim of full democratic centralism — which can only be truly realised when we have reforged the CPGB. The document concluded with four specific proposals:

1. Monthly membership aggregates should (for the moment) be given the formal right to call conferences of the organisation, leadership elections and decide on specific matters of strategy and tactics by a simple majority — none of this affecting the rights of the PCC nor its secretary.
2. Where appropriate the PCC should introduce written motions and submit them to vote and amendment at membership aggregates.
3. Measures to ensure that the *Weekly Worker* becomes a real organiser, educator and agitator, ie a full sized paper that combines the achievements of *The Leninist* and the *Daily Worker*.
4. Measures designed to facilitate the development of our layer of supporters; crucially, organising them in branches and fully involving them in the struggle to reforge the CPCIB.



## 5. Chronology and character of debate

I expected the proposals put forward by comrade John Bridge in July to be welcomed. And it has to be said that the majority of comrades did. Much to my disappointment though, instead of concentrating on the concrete proposals and constructively criticising them, two comrades in particular used the occasion (as was their right) to express their general frustration and a haughty impatience with comrades at all levels. They put forward a number of their own proposals which centred on the call for an annual leadership election and conference. Some of their general points were worthy of consideration but I must say that, overall, what they presented smacked of formalism. That did not mean I adopted a position of the unthinking partisan (indeed with hindsight it could be said that I found myself in a minority, with only comrade Stan Kelsey clearly taking a similar position). I felt that a number of leading comrades reacted badly (or inexperiencedly) to criticism. There was clearly a hidden agenda for many of the personalities involved. Yet I would still say that as far as lam concerned some of what the proto-minority argued was valid (what they said in specific areas was fully in accord with the proposals of the PCC, eg on the *Weekly Worker*). That is why I initially treated their proposals and criticisms in a sympathetic way and on face value. Nevertheless while in tone and content some comrades counter-attacked in a wrong way, it also had to be admitted that they had easy targets. They were impatient and *offended* with what they saw as attacks from comrades who had, on the moral plane, the most problems and the least right to criticise others. Or at least that is how it seemed to me.

As already said, I argued that the minority's proposals be treated with respect. I criticised a number of comrades on both sides. Differences were, as far as I was concerned, ones of nuance or detail. That did not imply some golden mean. I defended the extension of democracy in the organisation *that served the extension of centralism*. That said, in the course of debate

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just as much heat as light was generated (the most advanced supporter of the CPGB in Crawley, who had been invited to the aggregate, was so shocked by our sharp exchange of accusation and counter-accusation that his report back nearly resulted in his branch declaring UDI). Because the matter was unresolved I moved that we continue the discussion at the next membership aggregate and to facilitate debate comrades submit written contributions (that at least was agreed).

In my opinion the *bickering* we witnessed at the July aggregate did not presuppose bad motives. Anyone who grasps the first thing about what the worldwide period of reaction means, let alone appreciates how difficult it is to be a communist in an organisation that is only the nucleus of a Communist Party, will not be surprised that all sorts of silly allegations were levelled and harped on about. They were surely more the product of isolation and adverse conditions than reality. No clearheaded comrade will begin by hunting out bad motives in these bickerings, however unpleasant they may be. Adverse conditions accounted for sordid rumours, backbiting, hurt egos, imagined insults and slurs. Adverse conditions breed such hurts among us by the score, and a Leninist organisation would be unworthy of the name if it did not say so and search for the cure in growth.

I will not go into the ins and outs of the four contributions that were submitted, nor the cut and thrust of debate — yet (we had documents from the PCC, Jack Conrad, Mike Marshall and one jointly signed by David Rhys, John Praven and Mike Marshall). Suffice to say while the next membership aggregate in August cast what I thought was an illuminating light on the political direction and method of our minority, it was obvious that more time was needed. A vote could have been taken and easily won for what had become the PCC's position and its set of proposals, but the debate was taking a new direction, taking on a new significance, perhaps revealing more about the problems of what had become our minority than the organisation as a whole. That is why I proposed a two day membership conference in September and further written contributions (this being one of them).

Unfortunately, instead of putting their ideas to the test of debate and a vote, comrades David Rhys and Mike Marshall sent in a miserable resignation letter in late August. Excusing their cowardice and lack of principle, they dishonestly claimed that our conference would have been a "show trial". Having stood on the platform of abstract democracy, they showed their true worth by running away from its living reality.

Frankly, I cannot say I was surprised. When a heated debate is in progress there usually begins to come into focus the central, fundamental

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points at issue, compared with which all minor and petty points fade more and more into the background. I think this is how matters stood in our organisation by mid-August 1993. Though *on paper* the differences between the specific proposals of the majority and minority do not appear great, I would even say that they were small, we were dealing with a process of divergence, whereby small differences were used as the starting point for a split.

In the working class movement splits can only be justified if they serve the struggle for communism. An organisational schism can only be principled if it concerns a matter of principle. Surely there was no principle at stake in whether we have for *the moment* leadership elections when the majority wants it instead of an annual election. Likewise, what does it really matter if there is an education commission or job descriptions? These things matter little. But backsliding elements need to turn such questions into principles to hide their political direction. The truth of that can be seen from studying what has been written and said; which I believe revealed the existence of two different *shades* within our organisation, one honest and revolutionary, one opportunist and cowardly.

## 6. A ‘Marxist’ critique

I shall now turn to the minority documents *Building and strengthening the Communist Party* (signed by comrades Mike Marshall, John Praven and David Rhys) and *A Marxist critique* (signed by comrade Mike Marshall), what claims they made and what lay behind them.

For Marxism-Leninism, categories like democratic centralism are *permeated with movement*. After all, we only establish such categories in order to break them up. That is why the PCC’s document *Democratic centralism and our strategy* made clear that Marxism-Leninism has “no ready made blueprints for communist organisation”. And yet our minority suffered from just such a static view. With formal democracy all shortcomings would, they assured us, be overcome; crucially — despite the fact that no *political criticisms* were advanced — a leadership which is meant to be bureaucratized and undemocratic (and presumably always has been). To prove all this the comrades treated us to a dubious ‘dialectical’ education, quoted in a scholastic fashion a variety of authorities and sources, and all in all showed that they had neither the theory nor the firm grip on reality that is vital if we are going to reforge the CPGB.

To see why I say this let us begin with *A Marxist critique*. Here is a strange document. It is reminiscent of the Gerry Healy or *Proletarian* school of ‘dialectics’. Instead of dealing in a straightforward manner with a straightforward question, pseudo-dialectics is used to provide a thick smokescreen for political weakness and political retreat. It is certainly far removed from the Leninist approach to method and organisation. This is said in a spirit of self criticism as well as criticism. Comrade Mike Marshall clearly had discovered a new idea but we did not teach him to master it. Intoxicated by heady words and concepts, he could not see the obvious fact that it was he and his fellow “fighters for democratic centralism” who were actually guilty of “merely sprinkling some dialectical jargon over their threadbare formal logic” ... even in the midst of the most tortured

formulations that possibility did not occur to him. Guided by his ‘method’, diabolical and hysterical, he was determined to attribute all sorts of bad motives and howling gaffs to a perfectly rational treatment of our origins, development and immediate prospects outlined in *Democratic centralism and our strategy*. So instead of businesslike proposals and a realistic assessment of our changing tasks, we got a sustained petty bourgeois attack on our organisation — all dressed up in “dialectical jargon”.

Marxist dialectics must never be confused with opportunist obscurantism. Genuine dialectics is not about instant answers or using “imaginary wisdom” to safeguard the dignity of certain easily bruised individuals. Marxism demands that concrete questions be examined in all their concreteness. So it is a basic principle of dialectics that there is no abstract truth. Comrade Mike Marshall violated Marxist dialectics with every step he took. He countered every concrete idea with an abstract diversion. To support his topsy-turvy world view he would have it that we were cleaved between the superior minority who were thinking dialectically and the lesser comrades who possess nothing but “threadbare formal logic”. Thus instead of having a real argument with our mighty dialecticians, the PCC of the CPGB had to set up Aunt Sallies with claims that our minority was “following” a “timeless recipe” for organisation.<sup>3</sup> Countering this caricature is easy.

First, the PCC statement that there is “no timeless recipe” in organisation was a general observation showing why it has been correct for our forms to evolve over time according to objective circumstances. It was not written with the intention of *misrepresenting* our minority’s “dialectical” arguments — a charge that veers towards paranoia. But if the cap fits...

Second, it should be said that it was the PCC which initiated the discussion on democratic centralism throughout the organisation. This was done in a extensive verbal report (summed up in *Democratic centralism and our strategy*) dealing with the development and growth of democracy in our organisation as part of the process of being and becoming.

Passing over comrade Mike Marshall’s missive on formal logic with which he began his document, let us proceed directly to his supposedly Marxist critique of the PCC’s *Democratic centralism and our strategy*. We can be brief. Comrade Mike Marshall possesses not the dialectical method but a vulgar version of linguistic sophistry. He said he had a problem with our proposal to develop democracy (and thus the centralism of the organisation) because of a “logical non sequitur”, because of “abstraction”, because they are “logically flawed”.

With a modesty that becomes him, comrade Mike Marshall claims he follows “Marx’s example” in his analysis of *Democratic centralism and our strategy*.<sup>4</sup> Sadly it must be said that the ‘credit’ should go to Ludwig Wittgenstein not Karl Marx. For instead of our proposals being subjected to an *all rounded* materialist analysis—which would have been rewarding — we get a cynicism and superficial language games. Because comrade Mike Marshall thinks questions about words are the truth, he launches his polemic by quoting and answering the PCC in the following semantic fashion: “‘Party membership is tiny and mainly London based. Though there is now a layer of carded-up supporters of the Party most of them are not organised in branches and those that are, operate on a very low level. Under these conditions suggestions that there should be full democracy from below, including the election of cell secretaries, annual conferences of members and elections to the Provisional Central Committee are misplaced.’”

This PCC position, says comrade Mike Marshall, is “a logical non sequitur.” Despite “under these conditions” the “assertion in the second sentence,” he maintains, “is not supported by the first.” Surely, if anything, he says, “the organisation of supporters is conditioned by the organisation of the membership, rather than the other way round.” Finally, as for the size of the ‘Party membership’, it is given in paragraph 3 [of the PCC’s *Democratic centralism and our strategy*— JC] that even the refoundation congress of the CPGB will be called on ‘political not numerical criteria’.<sup>5</sup>

What was actually being put forward here by our PCC is the simple and unfortunate fact that *politically* we still have a long way to go before we can reforge the CPGB and hence a long way before we can realise the operation of the full rules of democratic centralism, which most surely require living and deep ties with the masses. Based on the actual conditions under which we operate the PCC proposed to *develop* democratic centralism in accordance and in step with the modest *political* level our organisation has reached. After all, among the criteria we put forward necessary to reforge the CPGB are “roots” in the working class and the winning of “advanced workers to communism”.<sup>6</sup> Criteria we readily admit we have yet to achieve.

Regular (in most legal communist parties biennial) congresses and central committee elections are essential for an organisation that has won the advanced section of workers, has become part of the working class and thus operates throughout the country in every town and city. It is necessary in such a Party to regularly bring together *elected delegates* because of the different views that result from different experiences, conditions and

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levels of the ongoing class struggle and the different impact of communist propaganda, agitation and leadership. In our organisation it is possible to bring together *all* comrades within one meeting room (and we are not talking about Wembley Conference Centre) once a month and allow a general airing and sorting out of views. Also in our organisation *most* members meet together in weekly seminars and work on a day-to-day basis in the closest proximity. That is why when it comes to democratic centralism the emphasis of the PCC is on monthly membership aggregates, not annual conferences. Conferences will, for the moment, as has so far been the case, be arranged if there is a major difference in the organisation or we want to make an authoritative public statement, eg the reclaiming of our Party's name. Of course all these arguments were placed before comrade Mike Marshall at the membership aggregate in July 1993. In his document he takes no notice of any of that. He is intent on setting his high linguistic analysis out of context.

We read: "Cells are, we have to admit", he is quoting our resolution again, "essentially sub-committees of the PCC enabling it to carry out its national work. Members are, and have to be regularly moved from one cell, and one area of responsibility to another. None of our cells are geographically based, except the one we have implanted in Scotland. Appointment of officials from above should therefore be maintained for the present." "Here," announces comrade Mike Marshall with the triumph of the truffle hunter, "is another logical non sequitur." "Why," he says, "should cells not be essentially sub-committees of the PCC?" Along the lines of A should equal A, question follows question. "Must the essential nature of cells be changed before democratic centralism can be permitted? Will there be a time when members are not regularly moved from one cell to another? Despite 'therefore' the assertion is unsupported by the preceding observations".<sup>7</sup>

Yes, our present cells have to be "essentially sub-committees of the PCC" because we want to edit and produce the PCC's publications, organise and coordinate its finances, members, supporters and campaigns. In the reformed Communist Party *local*, ie geographical cells will be autonomous organisations. But to suggest autonomy for cells concerned with central responsibilities in are forged Communist Party, let alone in our nucleus, is anarchism.

Then, as cited above, comrade Mike Marshall asks whether the "essential nature of cells [must] be changed before democratic centralism can be permitted?" Here is an example of when did you stop beating your wife trickery if ever there was. In our organisation democratic centralism is a

reality. Being one of the three authors of *Building and strengthening the Communist Party*, which more in sorrow than joy is forced to admit that “we already have some democracy in the Party” and “open ideological struggle” (that is the “essence of real democracy”), he should be clear on this matter. Patently, because he was not, we will have to explain our position yet again. Party organisation must become *national*, ie local, before this autonomous aspect of democratic centralism can become real. This has nothing to do with “permitting” democratic centralism, rather laying the material base for this aspect of it. What about moving comrades? Yes, in the future, when the CPGB is rooted in the masses, then there will not be the moving of locally based comrades from one local cell to another. The professional revolutionaries we have and are trying to cultivate today are one thing, the militant communist workers of tomorrow another. But then those that do not want to, will never grasp what goes to make a real Communist Party. A Communist Party represents the merger of the subjective movement of revolutionaries and their theory with the objective movement of the working class. Not for our minority, who want us to believe that all we lack is their leadership.

Comrade Mike Marshall continues. After quoting the PCC to the effect that conferences of the Leninists of the CPGB “have been and should for the moment continue to be held around specific issues, controversies or moments” he makes the following statement. “Can we assume then that, in the last four years since the last election [of the PCC — JC], there have been no issues, controversies, or moments worth holding a conference for, aside from the reclaiming of the party name two years ago? Such an assumption,” he says, “would not ‘smack’ of formalism, it would reek”. What is our reply? It is unambiguous and unashamed. Yes, over the last four years there has been “significant change” but till now no significant controversies that have divided our organisation. Debate, discussion and sharp exchanges there have been in our press and at weekly seminars, monthly membership aggregates and our week long annual schools. But, for members, all positively and quickly resolved. Nothing demanded a conference because *all* comrades were united round the substantial theory and practice of the *elected* leadership. To prove our ‘reeking’ formalism, comrade Mike Marshall should have put down in black and white what issues or controversies he thinks we should have organised a conference on. His silence speaks volumes for the profundity of his critique.

He goes on to claim that the “proposal of regular conferences (annual or whatever) seeks to break from this so that, if within 12 months there has been no [sic] conference, we can find out if the PCC is correct.” “Break”



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from what? The truth is that in our organisation there is the constant weekly, monthly and annual collective questioning of every theoretical controversy, current development, campaign and shift of emphasis. Comrade Mike Marshall's accusation that we inhabit a "static universe" which can "only exist in the abstract, as a result of formal logic" is entirely misplaced. He judges us according to the *formal* criteria of conferences, not real life.

What of membership aggregates? They obviously offended the democratic sensibilities of comrade Mike Marshall. He quotes the PCC:

"Regular aggregates of the whole membership have been organised where proposals and experiences of agreed actions are subject to lengthy discussion and debate." "But," alas, "even for members, attendance at an aggregate is by invitation only".<sup>8</sup> That is true. Nonetheless from the first *invitation* aggregate the PCC initiated, *all* members of the Party have been invited. For communists who base themselves on the trust they have in *elected* or for that matter unelected leaders and leaderships, reality should count for more than formal procedures. Not for comrade Mike Marshall. The fact of the matter is that the PCC has used its power of invitation in an attempt to broaden aggregates, so as to include various *supporters* of the Party in our debates and discussions. Invitation has in other words never been about *excluding* comrades but about *including* them.

According to comrade Mike Marshall the PCC's "commitment" to "allow selected members to vote on written motions at such times as the PCC sees appropriate" is not "true" democratic centralism but "an abstraction of it".<sup>9</sup> The evolving reality of our organisation has not, as has just been explained, been about allowing *select* members to vote on "written motions at such times as the PCC sees appropriate," but the maximum democratic centralism (and we mean by that not the maximum numbers talking but facilitating the maximum unity in action) possible at our stage of development. As has been said, *all* members have attended aggregates and the PCC has always responded to the confusions, doubts and criticisms of members. Though the PCC rightfully sets the agenda, this is done in a responsive and enabling fashion. The PCC is there to facilitate debate, not stifle it. Transparently comrade Mike Marshall's approach to democratic centralism is legalistic, the PCC's approach is dialectical.

For comrade Mike Marshall — a recent recruit from the world of petty bourgeois protest politics — the reason Party membership is "tiny" and "mainly London based" has nothing to do with material circumstances, everything to do with the organisation not being led by comrade Mike Marshall and his friends. He therefore makes the phantasmagorical claim

that “quantitative restrictions on democratic centralism are already having a qualitative effect”.<sup>10</sup> “No wonder,” he says, “seminars reveal a passive membership ... No wonder the national organiser believes that there is whispering in the ranks”.<sup>11</sup> The only ones who know about “whispering in the ranks” are, of course, comrade Mike Marshall and Co. As to a “passive membership”, well the majority of the organisation has worked exceedingly hard to ensure that, despite the most difficult conditions of worldwide reaction, we have made real progress. Far from “restrictions” on democratic centralism having a deleterious effect, the active *synthesis* of democracy and centralism we have achieved has allowed our organisation to enjoy a (comparatively) wide influence among militant workers, produce a regular press and recruit a layer of supporters throughout Great Britain.

At last we approach the *poisonous* conclusion of comrade Mike Marshall’s diatribe with its shameful pretext for desertion and political abstentionism. Without the slightest foundation he claims that the PCC’s supposed “formal logic” means it views democracy as a “distinct package which can be chopped off or grafted on at will”<sup>12</sup>. Obvious nonsense. As shown by reality and everything above, we most definitely view democratic centralism as a living process. Democratic centralism develops and gains strength through the ongoing struggle to unite communists around correct politics and the forging of links with the masses.

Unperturbed, comrade Mike Marshall claims the PCC displays the “formal logic” of the “mad microbiologist” who “surgically removes a major part of a tadpole’s central nervous system with the intention of eventually grafting it back into the adult frog.”<sup>13</sup> I will refrain from commenting on reactionary anti-science prejudices about “mad” microbiologists. Suffice to say the PCC has from the first *consistently* developed the democratic centralism of the Leninist organisation of the CPGB. What “surgical” *removal* there has been exists entirely in the mind (mad or otherwise) of comrade Mike Marshall. But comrade Mike Marshall knows the experiment will not work. Or should we say, in order to desert the selfless and principled communist fight for the reformed CPGB he must *say* it will not work. Hence we are told with absolute certainty “materialist dialectics” reveals that “the post-operative tadpole will never become a frog”.<sup>14</sup> Nothing, comrade Mike Marshall, certainly not materialist dialectics, “reveals” any such thing. All that is revealed is that no matter how many times we kiss you, you will never make the transition from petty bourgeois individualism to the moderm prince that the class struggle requires.

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Using his A does not equal A critique of “formal logic,” comrade Mike Marshall delivers what he thinks is the knockout blow. The fist is entirely misdirected. He admits that there is at least the “appearance” of the unity of communists “around correct aims and principles” under the PCC.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, though correct thinking is always dialectical, because he feels personally aggrieved appearances *must* be deceptive. He has learnt that we communists fight to make trade unions “schools for communism”. Sadly, as with dialectics, he has remembered something but not even reached the level of mere understanding. Comrade Mike Marshall actually calls trade unions “essentially schools for communism”.<sup>16</sup> Rubbish! Essentially trade unions are an expression of the working class operating as a class *within* the sphere of capitalist politics and economics. Under conditions of heightened class struggle or socialism they can *become* schools for communism. But to thus become requires the conscious intervention of the communist vanguard, not the spontaneous flowering of comrade Mike Marshall’s essence.

Comrade Mike Marshall has a point to make though. If trade unions are “essentially schools for communism” (which they are not), if “we built a school for communism” it would not mean it “would ipso facto be a trade union”.<sup>17</sup> A does not always equal A. Using this device comrade Mike Marshall thinks he has us. He tells us once more what we already know, have said on countless occasions and consistently put into practice. Democratic centralism is “essential” to unite communists around the correct aims and principles.<sup>18</sup> But then without what, when and where, let alone logic he claims that “quantitative” limits on democratic centralism are damaging our “aims and principles”<sup>19</sup> By equating our appropriate democratic centralism with bureaucratic centralism he can then equate our “revolutionary intentions” with the “degeneration of official communisms [sic] into opportunism and bureaucracy”<sup>20</sup> A equals B and B led to C therefore A equals C.

How does comrade Mike Marshall know that the PCC will dissolve itself when the CPGB is reformed? He does not. Comrade Mike Marshall considers that such a proposition” relies on the law of identity, the first law of formal logic, which assumes that the bag of sugar remains a bag of sugar”.<sup>21</sup> We can do without such idiocy. Our organisation has always tested itself according to our aim of *changing*, changing from communist nucleus to Communist Party, from, if you like, A to B. It is according to the goal of reforming the CPGB that we assess all of our actions and campaigns — a process of constant self criticism which enables us to monitor, direct and accelerate our forward movement. Of course change

can take a negative form. Comrade Mike Marshall is a case in point. He has undergone a personal change from petty bourgeois individualism to communism and now with further change he inhabits the swamp of individualistic ex-communists. Or does comrade Mike Marshall claim “immunity” from this “dialectical process” which has inexorably affected every other opportunist deserter? Yes individuals, like all phenomena, turn into their opposites. Comrade Mike Marshall and his ally David Rhys prove it.

When it comes down to it, democratic centralism is for comrade Mike Marshall a chicken and egg situation, but the paradox entirely passes him by. Instead of understanding things in their real movement he wants to define them as being one category or another. Only chickens lay eggs, he says to himself. So for the egg to become a chicken it must behave like a full grown chicken *now*. No, the CPGB will not be reformed by our nucleus behaving as if it was the CPGB and having the “fullest” democratic centralism, if by “fullest” we mean the operation of the rules of a mass Communist Party which can operate among the masses freely, as implied by comrade Mike Marshall.<sup>22</sup> We have to recognise what we are, and what our material constraints are. And in terms of our analogy there is no doubt that we represent the *potential chicken* of the egg. With the right conditions we will, when the time is right, leave behind this provisional stage and turn into our opposite — the Party. But to call for this before we are ready is to call for the death of our organisation. For the moment the shell is not a hindrance, it is a necessity without which we cannot exist. Reforging the CPGB is the only way to realise the “fullest” democratic centralism. That has nothing to do with “blind faith” as insidiously suggested by the jaded comrade Mike Marshall. It is the tested conviction of revolutionaries who devote their lives to the proletarian revolution and the struggle for communism.

## 7. Building and strengthening what?

The essence of the PCC's position is that democratic centralism can only be understood as a process which broadens and deepens in step with the development of our organisation— an organisation which at the moment consists of members of the Communist Party, stands in the name of the Communist Party but is not the Communist Party. The title (and content) of the document produced by our three dissenters says it all: *Building and strengthening the Communist Party*. The fact of the matter is that there is no Communist Party in Great Britain, only a nucleus organised under the banner of the *Provisional Central Committee of the CPGB* — one would have thought that for all of us this is axiomatic. Yet nowhere do they deal with the evolution of our struggle, nowhere is there a concrete analysis of where we are at the moment.

The main problem with *Building and strengthening the Communist Party* is that, for all its claims, it does *not* treat democratic centralism dialectically but undialectically. Its authors take no account of the fact that though our struggle to reforge the CPGB has gone through *many different stages* it is still in its *infancy*. That, therefore, it is not right to begin now in terms of form where we mean to end up in the future. The fact of the matter is that the minority's document judges our organisation scholastically, primarily “working from the definition provided by the Communist International”, ie against a small quote from a resolution of the 2nd Congress of the Third International in 1920, which was in fact designed to equip newly formed, often mass *communist parties*, with the lessons of Bolshevism. What does it say?

The Communist Party must be built up on the basis of democratic centralism. The chief principle of democratic centralism is the election of higher party cells by the lower, the unconditional and indispensable binding authority of all the instructions of the higher bodies for the lower and the existence of a strong party centre whose authority is generally recognised for all the leading

party comrades in the period from one party conference to another.<sup>23</sup>

We have no problem with this general description of democratic centralism in a *Communist Party*. However it ought to be pointed out that Comintern provided other even more *centralist* recipes. At the very same congress cited above delegates agreed the famed 21 terms and conditions. The twelfth on democratic centralism reads in full as follows:

The parties belonging to the Communist International must be built on the basis of the principles of democratic centralism. In the present epoch of acute civil war the Communist Party will only be able to fulfil its duty if it is organised in as centralist a manner as possible, if iron discipline reigns within it and if the Party centre, sustained by the confidence of the Party membership, is endowed with the fullest rights and the most far-reaching powers.<sup>24</sup>

I wonder why our ‘democratic’ dissenters did not take this definition as the starting point to work from? Could it be they have no fancy for discipline, let alone “iron discipline”. No, as the PCC has correctly said, there are no “ready made blueprints for communist organisation”, no “timeless recipes” for structures and election procedures.<sup>25</sup> This, to restate our position once again, is “even more the case” when it comes to the struggle to reforge the CPGB, which is still in its “infancy”.<sup>26</sup> In other words there can be no question of projecting the mass Party of the future *or the past* as some model to be copied *now* in our conditions.

Undaunted, the comrades call for annual *congresses* on the basis of the authority of *their* 1920 Comintern quote (we follow the Bolshevik and general communist practice of distinguishing between a congress, which debates all issues and elects leading bodies, and a conference, which comes together to consider one or a limited range of issues). There is no misunderstanding about what our minority wanted: *Building and strengthening the Communist Party* says the annual ‘conference’ will elect a leadership, vote on reports from the PCC, members and cells and will thus be “the cardinal decision making body of the Party”<sup>27</sup>

Again taking the rules of an established Communist Party as its starting point, *Building and strengthening the Communist Party* says that a *congress* can be called by a majority on the PCC or “one third of either Party cells or members”.<sup>28</sup> In a Communist Party this tilting of democracy and initiative towards the minority is justified. One third of the basic organisations or membership even of a small Communist Party represents a real movement, a real body of opinion. But in our context we arrive at absurdity.

It is worth asking the authors of *Building and strengthening the Communist Party* what new developments have come about which

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demand an annual congress of our organisation? Or should we have staged annual congresses from 1981? This certainly seems to be the contention of comrade Mike Marshall.

What of the PCC? The PCC starts from where we are now in relationship to where we have come from and where we intend to go. There has never been anything timeless or abstract in our approach. Since our inception we have steadily extended both the democracy and centralism of the organisation as we have built it *top down*. Starting with a mere handful of comrades, recruits were won to our politics which from the beginning were always as open as they were principled. On that basis, despite limited formal democracy we always had maximum genuine democracy. How can the authors of *Building and strengthening the Communist Party* deny it?

Suitable comrades were added to the leading body by cooption, others were organised as best we could till we reached the point where we could establish cells. Besides that, conferences have been staged at which not only have the entire membership of the organisation been present, but sympathisers and fraternal delegates (they had full speaking but no voting rights). Conferences debated a range of issues and though the authors of *Building and strengthening the Communist Party* do not deal with it, elected and changed the personnel of the leading committee.

Within the last period the PCC has been promoting aggregates of the whole membership — part of the ongoing process of institutionalising discussion and debate (as said above, selected sympathisers have also been invited). It is now proposed to formally give aggregates voting and amending rights on motions presented by the PCC and, through a simple majority vote, the right to call for a conference. That in effect amounts to a monthly sub-conference of the whole organisation, something that is necessary and possible due to two main factors. We have made the first tentative steps towards organising outside London and yet we are still small enough for the whole membership to meet and have the fullest exchange of *individual views*. That will not last forever. Sooner rather than later we will have to bring together aggregates of cell secretaries or elected delegates or some such other form of representation.

What is the aim of all our proposals? They are designed to develop the political understanding and political practice of the whole organisation, ie, to take another step towards realising our overriding aim of reforging the CPGB. The authors of *Building and strengthening the Communist Party* say that it is “a fundamental truth of dialectics that the *essence* of a thing is only realised through its expression, ie *form*. Therefore, ideological struggle

can only realise its potential as a dynamising force if its result is expressed in a vote of those who have participated in that struggle where possible (ie, in the context of this discussion, the Party membership)”, We can go along with the first sentence about essence and form. But because we must make the elementary point to them that the essence of the thing, and especially the form, is undergoing a process of constant change, we must question the logic of what then follows. As comrade Mike Marshall should have told his fellow authors, the “therefore” is a “logical non sequitur”. Nothing in logic or life demands that ideological struggle *must* end in a vote if it is to “realise its potential as a dynamising force”. We have ideological struggle against the SWP in the pages of our press, for example. Should we do a readership poll? We have had public debates with all sorts of left groups. Was it wrong not to end them in votes? Here we surely have a sorry example of our minority’s bureaucratic thinking. Ideological struggle can act as a dynamising force without a vote — fact. That does not mean we are against votes. It all depends on circumstances. Yes, we will put your proposals to a vote of the Party membership ... as we will put our proposals to a vote by the Party membership. We now know, however, that you so-called “fighters for democratic centralism” will not accept the result nor abide by it. I unhesitatingly will.

The minority carry on with the claim that discussion in our organisation has a low level of participation. I must say that at the two membership aggregates we arranged on the question of democratic centralism I did not notice that. And the last seminar comrade David Rhys attended (and after saying not a thing slinked away from shamefaced) lasted well over four hours with debate ranging over many issues but centring on socialist democracy and the class nature of the former Soviet state. It cannot be denied that our debates are less impressive than the Bolsheviks who engaged in many fierce battles”.<sup>29</sup> But would our minority deny that our organisation has a record of honest and open ideological struggle second to none on the British left today?

Seminars on many occasions last well into the night. Is this because the “line” has been decided by the leadership? Take the vital questions of democratic counterrevolution, feminism and women’s liberation, European unity, parliamentary elections, the daily paper and the general strike. Have these not been fully debated over a whole series of meetings, sometimes spanning years?

Discussion has never been stopped, always encouraged. Those in and around our organisation with differences have from the commencement of our press and invitation meetings been offered a platform to defend and



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argue for their views. Leaving aside the brilliant open ideological struggle of *The Leninist*, we have had numerous face-to-face confrontations with all sorts of ideological tendencies ranging from 'left' communism to left Labourism. What applies nationally has been applied internationally. Friends from Iran, Turkey, Ireland, the USA and India have attended our schools and been given the fullest opportunity to criticise our theory and practice.

Though we have rarely if ever bothered with votes after such debates, are they not the *essence* of democratic centralism, which is open ideological struggle not "formal democracy". I would answer in the affirmative. Would the authors of *Building and strengthening the Communist Party* answer in the negative? It would appear to be the case. They actually state that the unity of form and essence— of formal democracy and ideological struggle — is *the only way* to ensure the convinced and united action of all comrades".<sup>30</sup> The 3rd Congress of Comintern in 1921 agreed an interesting resolution in flat contradiction to such fetishistic worshiping of formal democracy. "Formal democracy," it reads, "by itself cannot rid the workers' movement of either bureaucratic or anarchist tendencies because these in actual fact result from this type of democracy. All attempts to achieve the centralisation of the organisation and a strong leadership will be unsuccessful so long as we practice formal democracy"<sup>31</sup> A slight bending of the stick perhaps, but a powerful antidote to the completely one sided approach of our minority and a valuable pointer to why it displays both anarchistic and bureaucratic tendencies.

## 8. Fetishising formal democracy

What of day-to-day practice within the organisation. This is what seems to really bug the authors of *Building and strengthening the Communist Party*, who bureaucratically write of “confusion and disorganisation” and anarchistically of a “‘leaders and led’ situation in our Party”.<sup>32</sup> Reference has also been made by both sides in the argument about the curmudgeonly language that characterises some of the exchanges between comrades. Perhaps the minority has been guilty of this more than others. That said, there can be no excusing rudeness by comrades, especially leading comrades. But that should not be made in its turn into a reason for not carrying out agreed assignments or launching an attack on the concept of leadership itself. These are very difficult times for communists. We have to work *together* with the utmost discipline in order to turn outwards and lay the basis for reforging the CPGB and winning the broadest following for it. That is the best way to develop comradely relations and a comradely atmosphere. Something not obtainable through bureaucratic formal democracy which wants to model us on the “example” of the Chinese Red Army and give out written job descriptions nor an anarchistic plea that there should be no personal “pecking order”.<sup>33</sup>

We are well aware of the advantages of being able to neatly slot comrades into specific positions within the Communist Party with specific, well understood tasks. Along the same lines we want to move towards the situation where organisational relations among us are expressed through a well ordered chain of command between *committees* —from central committee, to district committee, to local committee, to cell and from cell back to local committee, to district committee, to central committee. But at the moment, as well as the organisational relationship between cells, supporters groups and the Provisional Central Committee there is also a web of leadership expressed through the personal chain of command not only via cell secretaries but PCC members in charge of

specific campaigns or tasks. The reason for this is the primitive level of our development.

Within our Communist Party nucleus — working with the maximum flexibility for the maximum effect — there is bound to be more tension between individual comrades than in the reformed Communist Party. We are trying to carry out national tasks without a fully fledged national organisation. The lines of communication are therefore more complex and confused because individual comrades have to carry out a whole range of different, and sometimes conflicting tasks. The answer is growth, not a list of formal “operating procedures and structures”.<sup>34</sup>

Because the minority rejects our practice of democratic centralism by using the incorrect method of counterposing to it the rules of an established Communist Party, they are compelled to fetishise formal democracy to an extraordinary degree. How this leads to completely unintended conclusions can be seen all too clearly in the following statement taken from *Building and strengthening the Communist Party*. It says, a leadership is “democratically elected” there “can be no real grounds for distrust in it, complaint that it is unrepresentative, and so every basis for its support by the membership”.<sup>35</sup>

Well apart from the fact that our leadership has been democratically elected, I can only tell the comrades that their contention is untrue. As we have pointed out on numerous occasions, the opportunist cliques that used to dominate the CPGB claimed to operate democratic centralism. Their Executive Committee was elected every two years. But we certainly did not trust it and there was plenty of ground for that mistrust. It was made up of opportunists who produced the *British Road to Socialism* and dreamed of the Labour Party introducing socialism. They manipulated congresses, curtailed debate and relied on a membership which was in the main politically ignorant, passive and therefore of little support for the actions they deigned to organise.

What of countries where capitalism rules using the naked fist? Countries where it is not possible to elect the leadership in an unfettered way. Do these hardly untypical conditions mean the membership should mistrust the leadership? We say, in the last analysis, comradely trust comes through ideological correctness and understanding. Though formal aspects of democracy have of necessity been curbed there can nonetheless be genuine democracy.

Now we come to education? Instead of an “education commission” what we should have been concentrating on in the summer months of 1993 is ensuring the success of our school in Greece. It will inform our subsequent

plans. That is not to deny the importance of systematic and constant education of communists. Indeed we have devoted considerable time and resources to developing correct consciousness among our comrades. Ever since 1985 we have been running weekly seminars which have had at their heart openings on theoretical questions. True, since October 1992, because of the changed political situation through which we were able to recruit a layer of supporters and develop roots among various sections of militant workers, our seminars have been based on the detailed political report, plus shorter reports of particular campaigns and developments. The idea of this was to make them accessible to new worker recruits and involve the whole organisation in the change of emphasis from polemic with the left to dialogue with advanced workers. Certainly seminars need to be kept under constant review, as does the timing of publication of our draft programme which our minority refer to. What should be underlined on the latter point though is the role practice and growth has in adding to and enriching the work we have already done. The main short term question before us, however, is transforming our layer of supporters into a layer of Party members. The PCC has argued that the development of our *Weekly Worker* into a full sized paper is crucial here. Perhaps we could begin to weld the whole organisation together and put in place the framework for the reforged CPGB through debate in the paper and an eventual vote by all supporters on a draft programme. It is more than a pity the authors of *Building and strengthening the Communist Party* do not address such questions, because without that happening there can be no possibility of rebuilding, let alone strengthening the Communist Party'.

## 9. Content of debate

In *Building and strengthening the Communist Party* our minority claimed that any hint or suggestion that the debate within our organisation revealed the opposition of “hard Bolshevik centralists versus soft Menshevik democrats” would be “formalistic and wrong”.<sup>36</sup> From our present vantage point though, it can only but be concluded that in broad terms this is exactly what was revealed. Behind all the minority’s pious claims to “agree that the present period demands strong leadership and greater centralism” lay the opposite.<sup>37</sup> The fight of democracy versus bureaucracy was in fact a fight between the organisational principles of communism and the organisational principles of opportunism.

Opportunism tends to proceed from the bottom upward. Wherever possible and as far as possible, it seeks to bureaucratically uphold the rights of the (backward) individual and champion ‘democracy’ often carried through to the point of anarchism. Communism, in contrast, strives to “proceed from the top downward, and upholds an extension of the rights and the powers of the centre in relation to its parts”.<sup>38</sup>

In this period of reaction, where the CPGB has been liquidated and most communists have been thrown into utter confusion, the top from which we strove to proceed organisationally in order to reforge our Party inevitably had the character of a group, but the one enjoying most influence in relationship to isolated communists and other communist groups by virtue of its activity and its revolutionary consistency (expressed through the pages of *The Leninist* and now the *Weekly Worker*). When the Party is reforged and communists are reunited, the top down principle will continue, but in another form, ie the *congress*. As the supreme decision making body of the Party the congress elects the central committee (and if we have done our work well it will have a membership pleasing to the advanced elements of the Party more than the backward) which will then proceed to lead the whole, yes, top down. This will not only give the Party

coherence, it will institutionalise the “organised distrust” of the vanguard towards the backward, the Party towards its sections, the whole towards the part, in other words the centre’s leadership over all local, district, national and other organisations.

Our minority’s platonic objection to being given “orders”, its fetishising of “formal democracy”, its hostility to the “pecking order”, its factional “distrust” of the part for the whole revealed a method of proceeding from bottom upwards. There is and must be a logic here. Communists who have advanced no *political criticism* of a leadership but all of a sudden express their loss of trust in it, who elevate their petty grumps and frustrations to matters of principle, who admit that there is “some democracy” and call for more but refuse to abide by it, are already sliding down the slippery slope towards the ideology of anti-communism. That is why our organisation has had to suffer constant outbursts of peek, abstention from work and proposals designed not to further the work of reforging the CPGB but to give freedom for those whose communism is withering into a narcissistic love affair with the sound of their own ‘brilliant’ voices.

After I, among others at the August membership aggregate, dared point to the backsliding that has characterised members of the minority, we were treated, as I expected, to a torrent of anarchistic accusations ranging from “rank pulling” to being “tin gods” who, fearing genuine debate, “hound” and “browbeat” the minority and can only “sling mud “ at them. Oh how the tender feelings of these would be “leaders of the working class” were hurt. No thick proletarian skins here — but the boil was lanced. There is incidentally in my view a close political connection between the minority’s bucking against discipline and the incessant nagging on about the personal *injury* they suffer which can easily be detected in their documents.

Being vain men with a lot to be modest about, any reference to facts about themselves naturally offends. They now tell us that it is impossible to work in our organisation because instead of honestly dealing with arguments themselves we engage in “personal attack”.<sup>39</sup> Put another way, we go for the player not the ball. The charge that we ignore the arguments of opponents is of course ridiculous. Anyone who takes the trouble for even a cursory examination of our publications from November 1981 to the present day would testify to that, as will comrades who attended the July and August membership aggregates where the *ideas* of the majority and minority on democratic centralism were debated in both great scope and detail. We might also add here that comrade David Rhys announced at the August membership aggregate that besides democratic centralism his

differences with the leadership centred on historical materialism and crisis theory (I think he meant his differences with Jack Conrad). Does he not recall how we took two seminars to explore his musings on historical materialism and how we sorted out his *trifling* and incorrect criticisms of the book *Which Road?* in the pages of *The Leninist* (Nos 119, 121, 122). Did we or did we not deal honestly and in a comradesly fashion with these questions? I know we did.

What our minority is really saying though is that it is wrong to take into account the interests, record and affiliations of the individuals who develop or misuse certain ideas. But ideas cannot be separated from individuals or social strata. The object and subject exist as a unity and must be studied as such. It would be a poor goalkeeper who kept his eye only on the ball and ignored the related movement and positioning of the other 21 players on the field. And we would be poor Marxists if we did not try might and main to take into account all factors contained in a phenomenon.

For example, looking back to the ancient world and the ideas of Plato, Aristotle and Socrates, it would be completely erroneous if we only saw the philosophy and failed to notice the class position of these philosophers. In the name of not indulging in “personal attacks”, should we not mention the fact that these leisured gentlemen lived off the forced labour of slaves and philosophised about the world from the position of ruthless exploiters?<sup>40</sup> To use another example, how can we know the ideas of religion —from the worship of nature by the primitives to the Branch Davidians —without studying the peoples who make and remake gods in their own image? (Incidentally, I shall here point out to comrade Mike Marshall that both the philosophy of the ancients and medieval religion often displayed a rigorous internal logic.) How about when the capitalist bosses say everyone should pull together for the benefit of the country, is it wrong to point out that they are damned hypocrites? And in the workers’ movement only a halfwit would take on face value the revolutionary pronouncements that on occasion come from the lips of clever left Labourites and calculating trade union bureaucrats. Likewise we can only cast doubt on a minority led by a (unskilled) leader who proposed to draw into its ranks an individual whose name in our ranks is synonymous with pompous phrase mongering and desertion — I am referring to a certain Paul Clark who recently resigned as a supporter of the CPGB apparently because his honour was sullied by the spot on description of him as a “pub room revolutionary”. Maybe we should have just tackled his ideas and ignored his catalogue of broken promises and unprincipled practice? No, unless we want to fall into error we must analyse every aspect of the whole

(whether that be an idea, an individual, a faction or anything else for that matter).

Sometimes truth hurts. I for one touched a raw petty bourgeois nerve with my rather innocent observation that the “real complaint” of the minority seemed to “amount to the fact that they are in a ‘subordinate’ position in the ‘pecking order’ to women comrades and are not the leadership of the organisation.” With hand on outraged heart it was vehemently denied. Misogyny is not trendy nowadays. Needless to say that was not really the point I was making. For the life of me I simply could not see what made our minority a political entity other than objection to the promotion of two comrades who (not unimportantly for us) happen to be women to leading positions: namely editor of our paper and national organiser.

Our minority could well have felt slighted — particularly I think comrade David Rhys, who for reasons of indiscipline and laziness, not theoretical differences, had been removed first from the PCC and then, after a brief tenure, as editor of our paper. Obviously he did not really accept these decisions. When during the course of debate he was cross examined by comrade Tam Burn at the August membership aggregate he had the residual honesty to admit that he did not support the election of the new editor nor the new national organiser. As such surely I was right not only about him but his one consistent ally of convenience, Mike Marshall. The minority’s cries about bureaucracy amount to no more than an unconscious displacement strategy for dissatisfaction with the personal composition of the leadership, a fig leaf to cover the anger these personalities feel at not being “rewarded” with leading positions. In other words, you are a “tin god” because you were appointed not in accordance with our wishes, but against them; you indulge in “rank pulling” because you are fighting for the decisions of the elected leadership to which we do not belong; you “possess nothing but threadbare formal logic” because you cite the genuine democracy of our organisation and pay no heed to our wish to do as we please; you are a “bureaucrat” because you refuse to hand over power to us.

So, comrades, what is bureaucracy really? For Leninists bureaucracy in the Party is characterised by a concentration on place and position. Bureaucracy means subordinating the interests of the Party to the interests of the sullen ego; it means fulminating against bad organisation in general and not fulfilling one’s own tasks; it means expressing mistrust in elected leaders while not advancing any serious political criticisms; it means agitating for formal democracy and then refusing to accept conference



votes. That bureaucracy of this kind is undesirable and detrimental to our aim of reorganising the Party is unquestionable, and we can safely leave it to the reader to judge which of the two sides that were contending in our organisation was guilty of such bureaucracy.

It is no accident that comrade David Rhys only began to complain about the lack of democracy in our organisation after his removal as editor of the *Daily Worker* (after weighing up the qualities of comrade Mike Marshall and comrade Lee-Anne Bates, we chose the latter). In the heady closing months of 1992 when preparation for a general strike was on the agenda of the working class, comrade — I mean the ‘great’ leader — David Rhys, announced his decision to give only *apart time* commitment to the paper and capped it by unilaterally taking a lengthy winter holiday without permission of his cell or the central leadership. He could have accepted his replacement as editor with good grace and worked with the devotion and discipline expected of the genuine communist. Instead he chose to adopt the politics of the Marxist trained intellectual who arrogantly uses pseudo-Marxism to justify flight from the proletarian organisation and cause. That in the course of struggle he ended up losing comrade John Praven and boasts just one follower, the mercurial Mike Marshall, from among our ranks does not surprise me. And it is easy to predict that they will soon tire of each other and go their own ways.

Pathetic and insubstantial though our opposition may have been, communists use such internal struggles to draw general lessons. For instance, here, the difference between workers on the one hand and declassed petty bourgeois elements on the other. Worker communists do not have hours to waste in self-indulgent disputes. Their time is valuable. At meetings they want to hear and discuss what will be useful to them: an accurate evaluation of the unfolding political situation and how we should respond. They value leaders who do this using the clearest language and have demonstrated their trustworthiness because of their correctness over the years. In the Party worker communists give their all as part of the collective without any prospect of personal advantage or personal glory. They do their best in any position they are assigned to with a voluntary discipline which comes from their instinctive feelings and thoughts. We all know who they are in our organisation.

De-classed individuals are quite different. They have little or no experience of fighting collectively. They lose faith easily and degenerate even faster. For them reputation is everything. Meetings are seen as an opportunity to show off, positions are viewed as rewards and woe betide the leadership that puts work before their feelings. Disagreement is their

natural element. They feed on rumour and gossip and fault finding. No amount of democracy is enough for them. It is only with difficulty that they submit to being a part subordinate to the whole, and then only from necessity, not inclination. Some recognise the need of discipline only for others, not elect minds. And of course our would be leader and would be college lecturer David Rhys came to consider himself just that. What a pity he decided to follow the well trod road to academic 'Marxism' rather than the infinitely harder path taken by Marx and Lenin from the academy to full time revolutionary activity. Both Marx and Lenin were brilliant examples of intellectuals who cast aside the specific mentality of the intellectual and thoroughly imbued themselves with the discipline of the proletariat. They despised those who expect to be leaders by right, who whinge and whine when given orders by intellectual 'inferiors', who flounce off if they happen to find themselves in a minority. With Marx and Lenin, like us, the cause always comes first.

## 10. Conclusion

I think I have proved that the struggle in our organisation was not a revolt by advocates of democratic centralism against a bureaucratic centralist regime, but a revolt by petty bourgeois individualists who, using the perennial cover of democracy, clashed with the supporters of proletarian organisation and discipline. Though they began their revolt with the persuasive call to extend *existing* democracy, though they approvingly quoted Comintern, Lenin and even Jack Conrad, it did not take long before they revealed their contempt for not just the new leaders of our organisation but the organisation itself. Putting their ego before everything, certainly above the rights of the majority, they decided not to risk what for them would be unbearable humiliation — seeing their proposals and politics democratically rejected by a conference of Communist Party members.

They now tell us that those “who are serious about revolution” “will” “know where to find” them. Well we certainly do. Having rejected the one and only organised nucleus committed to reforging the CPGB, it will not take these deserters long before they drop their pretended commitment to the Communist Party. Perhaps they really believe they are doing the right thing for the working class. That we can leave to the psychologist. For our part we will carry on with the exacting but rewarding fight to reforge the CPGB.

# Appendix I: Democratic centralism and our strategy

1. There are no ready made blue prints for communist organisation. Timeless recipes for the structures, election procedures and the relationship between the various component bodies that make up a Communist Party are the result of formal, not dialectical, thinking. This is even more the case when it comes to that struggle to reforge the CPGB, which though it has gone through many different stages is still in its infancy. In other words there can be no question of beginning now on the basis of how we mean to go on organisationally. There can be no projecting the mass Party of the future on to our embryonic nucleus, no testing our still modest achievements against some perfectly functioning Communist Party of the imagination. The Communist Party is a living organism. It evolves and constantly changes according to objective circumstances and the struggle to put the revolutionary programme into practice. In that light communists approach the question of organisation.

2. From the very beginning our founding comrades stressed that the main political question in Britain was reforging the CPGB. To achieve that aim they came together and in November 1981 began a principled and unremitting open ideological struggle. Principled, because there was nothing sectarian or narrow about the rebellion we led against the opportunists. They were wrecking the CPGB and betraying the working class. Leninists were determined to re-equip the working class with a revolutionary programme and a disciplined revolutionary Party. Unremitting, because that fight remains the sole reason why the Provisional Central Committee of the CPGB exists. When the CPGB is reforged the Provisional Central Committee will instantly hand over all its properties, records, presses, funds and other resources. Then it will dissolve itself.

3. Reforging the CPGB is a political question. The Communist Party is the

organised vanguard of the working class. That means, though it will almost certainly be necessary to build a Party of many millions to make revolution in a country like Britain, exactly when a refoundation congress of the CPGB is called depends on political not numerical criteria. Has the theoretical basis been laid for the communist programme? Have communist leaders been trained? Have roots been dug in the working class? Have advanced workers been won to communism? These questions tell us what we need to do in order to reforge the CPGB.

4. Because the Communist Party exists to provide the working class with the highest form of organisation and consciousness, it unites revolutionary theory with revolutionary practice. Communists cannot tolerate those who do not fully carry out agreed tasks or confine their revolutionary enthusiasm to pub room rhetoric. Members must act as one under a leadership which can change direction at a moment's notice according to new circumstances. Achieving that means developing both independently minded, self-activating cadres and the ideology of the whole Party. None of that can be arrived at by resolution mongering or issuing dictats. It requires the realisation of democratic centralism.

5. Democratic centralism entails the subordination of the minority to the majority when it comes to the actions of the Party. That does not mean the minority should be gagged. Minorities must have the possibility of becoming the majority. As long as they accept in practice the decisions of the majority, groups of comrades have the right to support alternative platforms and form themselves into temporary or permanent factions. Democratic centralism therefore represents a dialectical unity entailing the fullest, most open and frank debate along with the most determined, selfless, revolutionary action. Democratic centralism allows members of the Party to unitedly carry out actions, elect and be elected, criticise the mistakes of the Party and self-criticise their own failings without fear or favour. In essence then, democratic centralism is a process whereby communists are united around correct aims and principles.

6. In countries where capitalism rules using the naked fist the Party has to operate illegally. That means many aspects of democracy have to be curbed. For example, appointment from above takes precedence over election from below. However, if there is comradely trust among communists not even the most terroristic capitalist dictatorship can prevent the Communist Party operating freely among the masses and openly struggling for the correct aims and principles. In the communist press different ideas contend, criticisms are made and answered. In other words, though there might not be *formal* democracy, there is *genuine* democracy.

7. In a parliamentary democracy like Great Britain there is no need for the Communist Party to emphasise centralism as against aspects of democracy. The Party can without too much difficulty operate freely and publicly. That does not mean the Communist Party should have legalistic illusions. No matter where a Communist Party operates it must combine legal with illegal work. Nevertheless under such conditions within the Party there is no need *to curb* democracy. There should be public meetings and debates, ease of joining the membership, election of leaders from below and regular congresses and conferences.

8. The opportunist cliques that used to dominate the CPGB claimed to operate democratic centralism. That was a big lie that discredited democratic centralism and communism itself. Their *British Road to Socialism* was a reformist, not a revolutionary, programme. Minorities, above all the revolutionary Leninist minority, had no access to 'official' Party publications, which were treated as factional or private property. Far from having the possibility of becoming the majority, the minority was denied places on leading committees proportionate to its support and was subjected to a crude bureaucratic centralism which meant persecution and expulsion. Congresses might have been held regularly but they were gerrymandered, stage managed affairs that ended in the farce of workshops and one minute limits on speeches. Such a state of affairs had nothing to do with unity in action. Most members were completely inactive. The actions the petty careerists wanted were not motivated by Marxism-Leninism, but rather a craving for respectability in the eyes of bourgeois society.

9. It was in such difficult conditions that the Leninist wing of the CPGB organised itself. Bureaucratic centralism meant that to all intents and purposes communists had to operate under illegal conditions. That did not mean there was no democratic centralism. There was always ideological openness in our publications. That created ideological and organisational unity at all levels and enabled us to establish genuine democracy even though many formal aspects of democracy were lacking.

10. Despite adverse conditions the Leninists of the CPGB have so far organised five conferences of communists. Though participants were appointed from above, because of the trust among comrades they were respected as fully representative, authoritative and democratic. Besides electing a leading body of comrades these conferences debated a wide range of motions. They were submitted by the leadership and individual comrades. Minorities have if anything found themselves over-represented, certainly not under-represented. There has never been any limitation on discussion or criticism. As long as discussion and criticism takes

place on the basis of the principles of Marxism-Leninism, as long as it aims to develop the work of the Party, it helps develop centralism.

11. Apart from an open press and conferences organised round particular issues and controversies, the Leninist leadership of the CPGB presents weekly London seminars where members, supporters and friends of the Party are able to hear reports on current events, Party activities and finances. There has always been an atmosphere of free and open debate at these. That pattern is beginning to be reproduced in other parts of the country as the Party re-establishes itself.

12. Since we begun our open ideological struggle in November 1981 there has been a profound turn in world and domestic politics. The working class has suffered huge defeats — crucially the 1984-5 miners' Great Strike and the collapse of bureaucratic socialism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union through the democratic counterrevolutions of 1989-91. The period of reaction this unleashed saw many opportunists drop all pretence of having anything to do with communism. The whole political spectrum has moved to the right; even petty bourgeois leftists enthusiastically welcomed the "death of communism". So despite capitalism showing all the signs of pre-general crisis, bourgeois ideas are stronger than ever before. Yet despite the fact that communists have had to swim against a tidal wave of reactionary ideas we have made some real advances. Recapturing the name of our Party, standing CPGB candidates in the 1992 general election and our role in support of the miners, Timex and other workers all testify to real progress.

13. Nevertheless there remains a long way to go before we can reforge the CPGB. Party membership is tiny and mainly London based. Though there is now a layer of carded-up supporters of the Party, most of them are not organised in branches and those that are operate on a very low level. Under these conditions suggestions that there should be full democracy from below, including the election of cell secretaries, annual conferences of members and elections to the Provisional Central Committee are misplaced. Cells are, we have to admit, essentially sub-committees of the PCC enabling it to carry out its national work. Members are, and have to be, regularly moved from one cell, and one area of responsibility to another. None of our cells are geographically based, except the one we have implanted in Scotland. Appointment of officials from above should therefore be maintained for the present. As to annual conferences and elections, that smacks of formalism. Conferences have been and should for the moment continue to be held around specific issues, controversies or moments. At present most members of the Party work in the closest

proximity. Perhaps the majority meet together every week, and are able and are encouraged to express their views on every conceivable subject. More than that, regular aggregates of the whole membership have been organised where proposals and experiences of agreed actions are subject to lengthy discussion and debate. Obviously this cannot be a permanent state of affairs. As membership grows so will the need to institutionalise representation in policy making forums of debate.

14. At our present *primitive* stage, to further develop democratic centralism the Provisional Central Committee will introduce written motions when appropriate and submit them to votes and amendments at Party aggregates. That can only take the revolutionary unity of our organisation to a higher level because it will help to sharpen and clarify political positions. In the same spirit if a simple majority of members brought together at an aggregate agrees, then the Provisional Central Committee should organise a conference and/or elections to the leadership. Obviously that does not affect the right of the Provisional Central Committee nor the general secretary have in calling a conference.

15. The main task at the moment is to transform our layer of supporters by organising them in branches and into members of the Party. It cannot be emphasised too strongly that without some sort of a national framework there can be no possibility of reforging the CPGB. Here the 1993 school being built by the Provisional Central Committee is of particular importance in winning the battle of ideas and organisation. However, to fully involve our layer of supporters, to add to them, to facilitate their transition into Party members, it is essential that the *Weekly Worker* becomes a real organiser, educator and agitator. That cannot be done while it remains a single sheet. The new press we are ready to purchase will allow the *Weekly Worker* to combine the achievements of *The Leninist* and the *Daily Worker*. After publication of an expanded, proper sized *Weekly Worker* has begun, every effort will be made to draw supporters together at a national level. Debate on a major strategic political question should be initiated and carried in the pages of our paper and then crowned through a national conference of supporters. In this way we can begin to weld our supporters into a united body and prepare comrades for membership of the Party.



# Appendix II: Building and strengthening the Communist Party

Under certain circumstances, it is true, communists will organise with the maximum of centralisation and restricted democracy. The balance between the two is determined by objective conditions. Naturally though, in a bourgeois democracy like Britain the democratic side of democratic centralism in a Communist Party does not need to be curtailed (Jack Conrad *Which Road?*).<sup>41</sup>

## *What is democratic centralism?*

In 1922 George Lukacs stated that there was an inadequate theoretical understanding of the problem of organisation, that it had “often been seen in purely *technical* terms rather than as one of the most important *intellectual* problems of the revolution”.<sup>42</sup>

Seen in a technical way the question of party organisation, and therefore of democratic centralism, falls prey to pragmatism; to technical solutions to what are in reality and of necessity crucial political problems.

The aim of this document is to put democratic centralism in its necessary political context, and so to determine how we must operate now in order to get where we all want to go — towards the mass party of the working class capable of leading the overthrow of capitalism and building socialism.

So what is democratic centralism? The 2nd Congress of the Communist International in 1920 defined it as follows:

The Communist Party must be built up on the basis of democratic centralism. The chief principle of democratic centralism is the election of higher party cells by the lower, the unconditional and indispensable binding authority of all the instructions of the higher bodies for the lower and the existence of a strong party centre whose authority is generally recognised for all the leading

party comrades in the period from one party conference to another.<sup>43</sup> Working from the definition provided by the Communist International, we will move on to look at the relationship between its two components.

### *The dialectic of democracy and centralism*

Then is no trade off between democracy and centralism. The Party is not a box with only room for so much of one and so much of the other. The relationship is a dialectical one, and so each one determines and *develops* the other in the course of its own development:

Democratic centralism is a fundamental organisational principle which comprises the dialectical unity of democracy and centralism. Centralism is required to form an organisation which strikes simultaneously as one fist; democracy is required to ensure that the blows are struck on correct principles. Democratic centralism is a vital mechanism which enables the majority to adopt correct positions, ensures unity of will on the correct principles and subsequently imposes unity in action through the submission of the minority to the majority.<sup>44</sup>

It is evident from this that the caricature some comrades have tried to draw in the course of this debate — that of the hard Bolshevik centralists versus the soft Menshevik democrats— is formalistic and wrong. Democracy and centralism are united: *democracy gives you the strength to centralise*. Comrade Silahtar continues in warning of the dangers of such formalism:

There is an important point which must be made on the subject of democratic centralism: that it is the formalistic, and solely formalistic, interpretation which rejects the essence of this principle and robs it of its content. This danger is especially pertinent for parties with young and inexperienced cadres and which are passing through a *process of re-establishment*. The formalistic understanding imposes ‘bureaucratic centralism’ in the name of centralism.<sup>45</sup>

To counteract this, the fullest realisation of democratic centralism possible is necessary.

Some comrades have argued that we already have some democracy in the Party (true) and that this is sufficient (untrue). Often, this claim is based on the potential for open debate within the organisation and confidence in existing channels. It is correct to state that open ideological struggle is the essence of real democracy. But it is wrong to counterpose this against the *formal* democracy of votes on issues, conferences, elections, etc.

It is true to say that where such formal democracy exists in isolation from free debate within an organisation it is gutted of the essential feature of democracy and acts as a rubber stamp for the status quo. Comrade John Bridge recently described this as a characteristic feature of ‘official

communist' organisations. But if our understanding of democracy is confined to the level of "sticking up your hand for a vote" we reduce it to the level of the 'official communists': ie, a bourgeois concept of democracy.

It is a fundamental truth of dialectics that the *essence* of a thing is only realised through its expression, *reform*. Therefore, ideological struggle can only realise its potential as a dynamising force if its result is expressed in a vote of those who have participated in that struggle where possible (ie, in the context of this discussion, the Party membership).

As things stand, the degree of initiation of debates and the level of participation in them by our comrades is low. This is not because we have gone through so much together and therefore established a broad base of agreement. The Bolsheviks had gone through much more together, had themselves established a greater programmatic basis for agreement than has been seen within the revolutionary movement before or since, and yet still engaged in many fierce battles. Indeed, it is only through such battles that a real and lasting basis of agreement can be built. It is a healthy and normal aspect of Party life, and one that is brought fully into play by the democratic decision-making process.

The unity of form and essence — of formal democracy and ideological struggle — is the only way to ensure the convinced and united action of all comrades.

Lenin fully understood this, and when conditions allowed in 1905 he seized on the opportunity to democratise the party structures, knowing that it could only strengthen party organisation and the confidence of the working class in that organisation:

The St Petersburg worker Social Democrats [communists] know that the whole Party organisation is now built on a *democratic* basis. This means that all the Party members take part in the election of officials, committee members and so forth, that *all* the Party members discuss and *decide* questions concerning the political campaigns of the proletariat, and that *all* the Party members *determine* the line of tactics of the Party organisations.<sup>46</sup>

One problem we experience today is that our comrades are not developed to engage in such necessary, constant assessment. In part this is a question of cadre development through education, an integral aspect of democratic centralism which is discussed below, But it is also because comrades often see little point in participating in debates whose result they regard as already determined by the leadership line. Often, when an instantaneous reaction by the Party as a whole is needed, such leadership action is necessary. But when it becomes habitual it distorts the development of a

healthy Party life. If this becomes so, then leadership does not develop; centralism and communist leadership degenerate merely into issuing orders, a situation which cannot produce the confidence that communist leadership needs to function.

Election to leadership is a necessary facet of democratic centralism —indeed, one of its defining features, as we see from the Communist International resolution. Lenin emphasises the need “to see to it that all the higher standing bodies are elected, accountable and subject to recall”.<sup>47</sup>

We have already outlined why votes and decisions are not just ‘nice’ things to do, but why they facilitate the smooth running and effective centralisation of the Communist Party.

In the course of discussion and activity within the Party it becomes clear who the best leaders are. In debate, comrades will see who represents what, who is right and who is wrong. On this basis it is possible to select the most effective leadership. The collective decision of active communists is the best way to select their collective leadership. Either that, or the leadership must acknowledge that it has been unable to develop a membership of such active communists, which itself must call into question the quality of that leadership.

By such a process the identification of the membership with the leadership increases, as does its trust. This, therefore, is essential to the development of centralism within the Party. Where a leadership is democratically elected, there can be no real grounds for distrust in it, complaint that it is unrepresentative, and so every basis for its support by the membership.

In speaking of the election of the leadership, we must also be clear on the role and tasks of the leadership, both individually and collectively. The fundamental task of a Party leader is to guarantee the training and development of leaders, producing all communists as leaders, and so removing the perennial complaint of a ‘leaders and led’ situation in our Party. To facilitate this, a clear delineation of duties and responsibilities of comrades, especially those in leading positions; is urgently needed to reduce to the minimum confusion and disorganisation.

We need to establish standard operating procedures that both simplify legal work and are indispensable for illegal work. By way of example, the Chinese Red Army had few problems with its chain of command: orders went through the immediate superior. The chain of command was simple and understood by all. It was therefore easy to fit into.

Such methods include delineation of responsibilities: what and who a particular comrade has responsibility over, and what they do not. Methods

like these simplify Party work by removing the mystique of leadership. Comrades have *collective* responsibility as a member of the committee on which they serve, and *individual* responsibility for the particular tasks or posts assigned them.

The existence of an attitude in the Party which states ‘you shouldn’t speak that way to the holder of a particular position’ can only mean that such an attitude is permissible if reversed. This is wrong. One comrade’s dealings with another should not have the character of a pecking order. Comrades should deal with each other as comrades. Collective subordination of one body to another does not mean the subordination of any one individual in the latter to any one individual in the former, unless such a relationship is outlined in the clearly defined operating procedures and structures of the Party.

### *The Paper*

We agree entirely with comrade Bridge’s proposals on the role of the Party press: the need for its expansion, enabling it to draw together the polemical and propagandist strengths of *The Leninist* with the immediate response reportage and agitation of the *Daily/Weekly Worker*.

One important facet of the former that we currently lack is the ability to engage in debates both within our ranks and within the wider workers’ movement; a process that Lenin argued was necessary for any “real sorting out” to occur:

[W]e desire our publications to become organs for the *discussion* of all questions by all Russian Social Democrats [communists] of the most diverse shades of opinion. We do not reject polemics between comrades, but, on the contrary, are prepared to give them considerable space in our columns. Open polemics, conducted in full view of all Russian Social Democrats and class conscious workers, are necessary and desirable in order to clarify the depth of existing differences, in order to afford discussion of disputed questions from all angles.<sup>48</sup>

[T]he Party leadership must open these discussions to the rank and file, taking great care that they are presented correctly.<sup>49</sup>

Debate must take place in front of the class conscious workers in order that they can learn and judge from the debate who is right, and so the correct line of march for their own struggles.

In this context, it is important that we encourage comrades to express their views and disagreements in the Party press — including this current discussion.

### *Education*

Education is in no way a separate subject from democratic centralism. It is essential to the development of communists, and so of the Party in all respects: “what determines discipline is correct consciousness”.<sup>50</sup> Correct consciousness is not formed through the passive absorption of any line that the leadership hands down, but through the *active* search for truth: the full involvement of each comrade in ideological struggle. Education —providing the raw material and method for each comrade — enables this.

The Communist International understood the importance of education, and emphasised its role.

Educational work must be systematically organised and constantly carried out by the entire system of party organisations, in all the party’s working collectives; thereby an increasingly high degree of specialisation can also be attained.<sup>51</sup>

To equip our comrades as *leaders of the working class*, its *collective consciousness*, it is necessary to approach this question with far more seriousness and rigour than has been the case until now. Proposals for this will be advanced in the concluding section of this document.

### *Concrete proposals*

Resulting from this discussion, we wish to make three main proposals:

#### 1. The convening of an annual conference

In addition to the provisions made available for conferences on particular questions agreed by the 4th Conference of the Leninists of the CPGB, there should be an annual conference representing all members, with the basic structure of:

- a) Political and organisational reports by the PCC, supplied beforehand to members for discussion.
- b) Discussion on these reports.
- c) Amendments to, and voting on, these reports.
- d) Additional resolutions from members, Party committees, etc, supplied to members beforehand
- e) Election of the Provisional Central Committee

The first of such conferences should be convened within six to nine months.

We also propose that extraordinary conferences may be called by a PCC majority, or one third of either Party cells or members.

Conferences should be the cardinal decision making body of the Party.

## 2. Elections

We propose:

- a) The election of the Provisional Central Committee at the annual conference.
- b) That the PCC is accountable and recallable.
- c) The development of a clearly understood and applied division of labour by the Party with regard to leading positions, and that comrades in leading positions should be accountable to the Party membership.

## 3. Education programme

Alongside the continuing development of the induction programme, we propose:

- a) The restructuring of London seminars to allow scope for the inclusion of an education programme of a more structured theoretical nature. The establishment of similar seminars outside of London where possible, and if possible on a weekly basis.
- b) The organisation of regular day schools on both theoretical issues and practical issues.
- c) The establishment of an *education commission* to develop communist education, to be convened within not less than a one month period, to report material progress to an aggregate meeting of the membership in not more than a two month period from now.

Any education process must continue to involve comrades in discussion around the development of the Party programme (which has disappeared from view over the last year or so).

Towards this end of education and open ideological struggle, the contributions to this debate should be published in full. We all agree that the present period demands strong leadership and greater centralism. This document outlines the way forward for this necessary development, through the vital extension of democratic centralism. What is the objective barrier to the deepening of democratic centralism to the extent proposed in these pages? There is none. The only question for Party members is, comrades, do you trust yourselves with the future of your Party and class? We believe you do.

*Mike Marshall*

*John Praven*

*David Rhys*

# Appendix III: A Marxist critique of Democratic centralism and our strategy

“There are no ready made blue prints for communist organisation” but is that any reason for throwing away the spirit level and the plumb line? There can be no question of not “beginning now as we mean to go on” as far as democratic centralism is concerned.

It must be emphasised that those of us proposing “structures, election procedures, or relationships between the various component bodies that make up a Communist Party” are not following some “timeless recipe”. To misrepresent our dialectical arguments in this way is to set up an Aunt Sally, easily knocked down, rather than to have the real argument which is now shaping up over who is actually thinking dialectically and who is merely sprinkling some dialectical jargon over their threadbare formal logic.

Please bear with me then while I attempt to clarify what is meant by “formal thinking” and “formalism”. Formal logic is based on three laws:

- 1) The law of identity (A equals A). I am me. A two pound bag of sugar is a two pound bag of sugar.
- 2) The law of non-contradiction (A is not equal to non-A); I am not somebody else. A two pound bag of sugar is not a jar of pickles.
- 3) The law of the excluded middle (If A equals A, it cannot equal non-A as well). We are not me. If all we have is a two pound bag of sugar and a jar of pickles, and if one of those things is not a jar of pickles, it must be a two pound bag of sugar with no pickles in it.

These three fundamental laws have a material content and an objective basis; that they are explicit formulations of the instinctive logic of common sense. They constitute the prevailing rules of thought in the bourgeois world. Comrade Z [name changed] expressed them beautifully in this debate when she said:



1) "I am on the PCC because I am politically advanced." The law of identity.

2) "The other members are not on the PCC because they are politically backward." The law of non-contradiction.

3) "If the other members were advanced enough to have a vote, they would be on the PCC." The law of the excluded middle. So what is so wrong with "formal thinking"?

1. Formal logic demands a static universe.

Even a two pound bag of sugar is no longer itself if we have equipment sensitive enough to show its constant changes in weight and volume. If we move the bag of sugar through space, we notice that it also changes according to where it is. As soon as we admit motion and time into the scenario we find that nothing remains itself For A to be A requires a snapshot view of reality, and therefore a view that is only true in the abstract.

2. Formal logic erects impassable barriers between things.

A world is presupposed in which everything exists in isolation, whereas we know that all matter is interconnected, however indirectly. Every phenomenon exists in relation to its surroundings.

3. Formal logic excludes difference from identity.

Even in inorganic nature, identity as such is non-existent in reality. Every body is continually exposed to mechanical, physical and chemical influences, which are always changing it and modifying its identity. Without the continual generation of variety, natural selection alone would not bring evolution.

4. The laws of formal logic are presented as absolute.

At various stages in the development of the physical sciences, chemical elements, molecules, atoms electrons, were considered by metaphysical-minded thinkers to be unchanging substances. Beyond and behind these mankind could not go. With the further advance of the natural sciences, each one of these eternal absolutes has been in turn overthrown. Each of these constituent parts of material formations has been demonstrated to be conditioned, limited, and relative. All their pretensions to be absolute, unlimited, and unchanging, have been proven false.

5. Formal logic can account for everything but itself. One of the superior features of materialist dialectics over formal logic is the fact that, unlike formal logic, dialectics can not only account for the existence of formal logic but can also tell us why it supersedes formal logic. Dialectics can explain itself to itself and to others. That is why it is incomparably more logical than formal thinking.

Dialectics is the logic of movement, of evolution, of change. It deals with an ever changing complex and contradictory reality. Everything that happens is not the result of arbitrary forces but the result of definite and regularly operating laws. This is true of the mental processes with which logic directly concerns itself. The laws of mental processes exist.

All that is real is rational (Hegel).

Hegel, in his *Logic* established a series of laws: change of quantity into quality, development through contradictions, conflict of content and form, interruption of continuity [discontinuity], change of possibility into inevitability, etc, which are just as important for theoretical thought as is the simple syllogism for more elementary tasks.<sup>52</sup>

Marx, as we all know, turned Hegel's idealist dialectics up side down, to put them on their feet, and invented materialist dialectics, the plumb line and the spirit level alluded to in my opening metaphor. Glance at any page of say Marx's *Critique of Hegel's Doctrine of the State* and you will mostly find Marx picking through Hegel's arguments and taking the piss whenever he discovered an unsupported assertion camouflaged by a "therefore" or some other rhetorical means of juxtaposing ideas to make them look as if they logically flowed from each other. Everything that exists must have a necessary and sufficient reason for existence — and that reason can be discovered and communicated to others. So, before I discuss the concept of form and essence, let me now attempt to follow Marx's example and analyse *Democratic centralism and our strategy* with all the rigour my inferior intellect will allow.

Paragraph 13 states: "Party membership is tiny and mainly London based. Though there is now a layer of carded-up supporters of the Party most of them are not organised in branches and those that are, operate on a very low level. Under these conditions suggestions that there should be full democracy from below, including the election of cell secretaries, annual conferences of members and elections to the Provisional Central Committee are misplaced." This is a logical non sequitur. Despite "under these conditions" the assertion in the second sentence is not supported by the first. Surely, if anything, the organisation of supporters is conditioned by the organisation of the membership, rather than the other way round. As for the size of the "Party membership", it is given in paragraph 3 that even the refoundation congress of the CPGB will be called on "political not numerical criteria".

And further: "Cells are, we have to admit, *essentially* sub-committees of the PCC enabling it to carry out its national work. Members are, and have to be regularly moved from one cell, and one area of responsibility

to another. None of our cells are geographically based, except the one we have implanted in Scotland. Appointment of officials from above should therefore be maintained for the present” Here we have another logical non sequitur. Why should cells not be essentially subcommittees of the PCC? Must the essential nature of cells be changed before democratic centralism can be permitted? Will there be a time when members are not regularly moved from one cell to another? Despite “therefore” the assertion is unsupported by the preceding observations.

“Conferences have been and should for *the moment* continue to be held around specific issues, controversies or moments.” Can we assume then that, in the last four years since the last election there have been no issues, controversies, or moments worth holding a conference for, aside from the reclaiming of the party name two years ago? Such an assumption would not “smack” of formalism, it would reek. The proposal of regular conferences (annual or whatever) seeks to break from this so that, if within twelve months there has been no conference, we can find out if the PCC is correct. Has there been no significant change since the last conference? Such a static universe can only exist in the abstract, as a result of formal logic.

“Regular aggregates of the whole membership have been organised where proposals and experiences of agreed actions are subject to lengthy discussion and debate.” But, even for members, attendance at an aggregate is by invitation only. In paragraph 14 “At our present primitive stage, to further develop democratic centralism the Provisional Central Committee will introduce written motions *when appropriate* and submit them to votes and amendments at Party aggregates.”

Although in paragraph 7 “There should be public meetings and debates, ease of joining the membership, election of leaders from below and regular congresses and conferences”, *Democratic centralism and our strategy* takes us from a transitional stage to a *primitive* stage and the PCC’s commitment to democratic centralism and open ideological struggle is now further limited to allowing selected members to vote on written motions at such times as the PCC sees appropriate. This is not true democratic centralism but an abstraction of it. It may readily be seen from paragraphs 13 and 14 that the PCC’s concept of democratic centralism is a formal identity rather than a dialectical living process.

No wonder the seminars reveal a passive membership. No wonder Party membership is tiny and mainly London based. No wonder the National Organiser believes that there is whispering in the ranks. It would appear that the quantitative restrictions on democratic centralism are already

having a qualitative effect. There had to be a reason why we don't organise as well as we know how to.

To return to paragraph 1: "There can be no projecting the mass Party of the future on to our embryonic nucleus" is a product of formal logic whereby democracy is viewed as a distinct package which can be chopped off or grafted on at will. This is the formal logic of a mad microbiologist who surgically removes a major part of a tadpole's central nervous system with the intention of eventually grafting it back into the adult frog. "The Communist Party is a living organism." Materialist dialectics reveal that, the postoperative tadpole will never become a frog.

The essence of any thing does not and cannot come into existence all at once and remain there in immutable form. It is an integral and inseparable aspect of the object, sharing all the vicissitudes of its history.

In the algebra of formal logic, if A equals B, then B equals A. The two are synonymous and interchangeable. But the dialectical relation between essence and appearance is not reversible in the same way that the law of identity is reversible.

So when we read paragraph 5 we must not draw the common sense, formal, conclusion that: if democratic centralism is a process whereby communists are united around correct aims and principles, then, so long as we appear to unite around correct aims and principles, we objectively have democratic centralism, so that's all right then! Trade unions are essentially schools for communism. This does not mean that if we built a school for communism it would ipso facto be a trade union. Essentially man is an animal that makes tools for labour. This does not mean that every time a naturalist reports that another chimp has made a tool, the chimp has just qualified as a member of the human race.

So we have to say that the process of democratic centralism is literally *essential* to the uniting of communists around correct aims and principles. Quantitative limits on democratic centralism inflict qualitative damage to the uniting of communists around correct aims and principles. What are we going to do about it then?

"Communists cannot tolerate those who do not fully carry out agreed tasks or confine their revolutionary enthusiasm to pub room rhetoric" (para 4). This is true and, without the fullest commitment to the living reality of democratic centralism, the best of our revolutionary intentions remain a promise on a piece of paper. Surely the degeneration of official communisms into opportunism and bureaucracy, despite volumes of such papers, (and presumably the best intentions of their founders) reveals that this is not enough.

In para 2 we are assured that “When the CPQB is reformed the Provisional Central Committee will instantly hand over all its properties, records, presses, funds and other resources. Then it will dissolve itself” (para 2). How do we know? Well, because the fight to re-equip the working class with a revolutionary programme and a disciplined Party is the sole reason why the PCC exists! But that again relies on the law of identity, the first law of formal logic, which assumes that the bag of sugar remains a bag of sugar. In reality even the bag of sugar is gradually turning into its opposite. In *Democratic centralism and our strategy* the PCC implicitly claims immunity from this dialectical process.

The fundamental proposition of Marxian dialectics is that all boundaries in nature and society are conventional and mobile, that there is not a single phenomenon which cannot under certain conditions be transformed into its opposite.<sup>53</sup>

Blind faith is not scientific socialism. We have to be rational to become real. The fight for democratic centralism in its fullest sense is essential to the re forging of the CPQB and the execution of the proletariat’s historic mission.

*Mike Marshall*

July31 1993

## Appendix IV: Resignation letter

We have found it necessary to resign, not to curtail debate but to develop it. On raising our criticisms and proposals within your organisation we met with a response of personal attacks, answering none of the substantive points raised in *Building and strengthening the Communist Party* or *A Marxist Critique*. As time has gone by, far from ideas being clarified, more and more mud has been thrown; misogyny and sexism being merely a unifying theme between three signatories of *Building and strengthening the Communist Party*. *A Reply to 'Marxist' Critiques* states that “the real complaint of the comrades seems to amount to the fact that they are in a ‘subordinate’ position in the ‘pecking order’ to women comrades and are not in the leadership of the organisation.” Even were this true — and it is an unsubstantiated lie — it does not invalidate the criticisms we have raised.

Given that it has proved impossible to debate seriously within your organisation, we are compelled to develop and express our ideas outside.

The forthcoming conference was due to be a show trial with the PCC in the role of Vishinsky. The majority has been secured to the PCC’s satisfaction, with the conference as no more than the coup de grace, formalised with elections — ironically, with a recommended list, a device only introduced into the communist parties under Stalin to ensure the continuity of an opportunist leadership by a membership not trusted to make up its own mind without the great leader’s guidance.

The PCC shamelessly violated the key principle of open ideological struggle, relying instead on personal abuse. The original PCC statement claimed that minorities have always been overrepresented. This is a lie. This has been the first time a real minority has appeared in the organisation, and the response is clear. It has set a dangerous precedent. Any comrade raising substantive criticisms can expect the same treatment: a catalogue of their iniquities paraded before the organisation and then whispering

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behind their backs. This is not the conduct of a communist leadership, but of petty individuals intent on defending their position above all else –certainly above principle.

It is therefore necessary for communists to build independently of the PCC clique. Those comrades who are serious about revolution know where to find us.

For communism,

*Mike Marshall*

*David Rhys*

August 1993

# Appendix V: Statement of the 6th Conference of the Leninists of the Communist Party of Great Britain

The Provisional Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain initiated debate on democratic centralism on July 11 1993 at a Party membership aggregate. There followed a sharp and extensive debate during which all comrades were given maximum opportunity to express and develop their ideas. Members of the Party have gained a great deal from the debate. As shown by the 6th Conference of the Leninists of the CPGB, the fight to reforge the Party has been greatly strengthened.

The Conference met in a spirit of unity, optimism and comradeship. After a businesslike meeting comrades unanimously agreed the resolution *Democratic centralism and our strategy* and unanimously elected a new Provisional Central Committee.

However, it is to be regretted that two of the three members of the minority who claimed to stand for democratic centralism did not see the discussion through, let alone observe democratic centralism. This is not the act of serious communists.

They have run away from submitting their views to the conference of the Communist Party. Their commitment to democracy *in practice* and the essentially petty personal nature of their disagreements are therefore revealed.

September 4 1993



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(Lassalle to Marx, June 24 1852)

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