

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE C.B.G.

In a text written exactly ten years ago in which I contrasted our situation with that of the Bolshevik party, I wrote:

" In 1903 the Party could afford to pay about thirty full time distributors of ISKRA. (That is considerably larger than many organisations today). By 1905 there were just under 10,000 Bolsheviks. As a result of the Insurrection that rose to 34,000 in 1906. In the same period there were about 14,000 Mensheviks. In the RSDLP as a whole in 1907 there were 84,000 excluding the Bundist, Polish and Lettish sections . . . All this has to set against a total working class population of perhaps 3.5 million."

(Another Look at the Organisation Question. Bulletin Two)

In the founding text of the CBG, I quoted the above extract and added:

" Of course it is not just a question of numbers. The numbers are only an expression of the much more important political reality that the Bolsheviks, and the other revolutionary fractions, were a living part of the class. Noting the size and influence of the revolutionary fractions is merely another way of understanding that revolutionary politics were firmly implanted in the class' own consciousness and tradition.

Today we are almost unimaginably remote from that situation. We are confronted with - at best - a few hundred communists in the whole world attempting to intervene in a working class totally unfamiliar with revolutionary positions and its own revolutionary heritage and which remains totally unaware of our existence . . . We have to be clear that the situation facing us today is unprecedented for revolutionaries prior to a revolution."

(A New Regroupment. Bulletin Three)

If comrades will bear with me, I will quote myself one last time:

" The re-emergence of the revolutionary movement at the end of the Sixties had as its foundation the crucial assumption that 1) the economic crisis of capitalism was world-wide, inescapable and inexorably deepening; 2) in this period the proletariat was an undefeated, revolutionary class and would respond appropriately with the unfolding of the crisis; 3) the revolutionary movement would also grow in size, organisation and its influence on

the class. The past decade has seen the first two assumptions dramatically confirmed whilst the revolutionary fractions of the class remained tiny, fragile and isolated with no indications appearing of the mechanism which will take us from where we are today to the party which will be demanded by the revolutionary upheaval of tomorrow."

(Editorial. Bulletin One)

None of this was written in a defeatist spirit. It was part of an attempt to make a realistic assessment of how best to organise our work and to argue that we could only apply the lessons of the last revolutionary wave if we understood the crucial differences in the two periods. All of it was written virtually a decade ago at a point which stands almost exactly half-way between the first re-emergence of organisations of Left Communism and the present.

Where do we find ourselves today? The economic crisis has certainly deepened and proved inescapable. While the resilience of the major Western economies, particularly in the light of the staggering US budget and trade deficits, has proved surprising, the price has clearly been a catastrophic deepening of crisis in the Third world and the Eastern Bloc, which today stands on the edge of an abyss.

The working class remains undefeated and has maintained a militancy and willingness to fight the escalating onslaught on their standard of living, particularly in Russia and its former satellites. However it is true to say that we have seen a definite and continuing impasse in the maturation of political consciousness within the class. Even the high point of the Polish events, where an ability to sweep aside sectoral divisions and a high degree of self-organisation were displayed, dead-ended in nationalism and the birth of Solidarnosc. Disturbingly the highest levels of militancy in Russia and the Eastern Bloc co-exist with frighteningly strong bourgeois ideologies. Nationalism, ethnic divisions, democratic illusions of parliamentarism and reformism, myths about the benefits of a "free market", all weigh heavily on the proletariat. It is true to say that the development of working class consciousness has been a much more hesitant, lengthy and confused process than we imagined twenty years ago.

However when we turn to the revolutionary milieu we find our original assumption of a process of organisational gains, numerical growth and increasing influence, brutally confounded. In some respects we are actually worse off than we were at the very beginning, twenty years ago. Numerically, my educated guess would be that we have actually experienced a certain amount of shrinkage of the infinitely small several hundreds of the early Seventies. The largest proportion of militants currently active were founder members, or very early recruits, of the existing organisations. Very few new militants have appeared, certainly in the past decade. Today we could probably get every communist militant on a couple of jumbo jets.

Our influence on the class remains what it always was - functionally zero. The world proletariat is ignorant of our existence, let alone our politics. In practical terms, the interventionary work of the milieu as a whole, in terms of papers sold and leaflets distributed, has certainly diminished.

On an organisational level, the milieu has certainly lost ground. The International Conferences begun in 1976, had by 1980 been destroyed by the sectarian manoeuvres of the CWO and Battaglia Comunista. No other forum for fraternal debate and confrontation has appeared. The marriage of Battaglia Comunista and the CWO has dead-ended in embarrassing stagnation. The most important organisation within the milieu, the only one to establish a convincing international presence, the ICC, was almost destroyed by a series of damaging splits. Today, its sectarian, monolithic and paranoid practice has created such antipathy within the milieu, it is no longer a credible focus for regroupment. Within the milieu as a whole, sectarianism and monolithism is compounded by rancour and hostility.

On the question of political clarity, comrades have argued that there are signs of clear degeneration within elements of the milieu, particularly on the question of the party and on the understanding of the fundamental of capitalist decadence.

Part of the programmatic bedrock of the Left Communist milieu is a belief that the leadership of revolutionary fractions is an indispensable part of the revolution. We are not an optional extra, a useful accelerator, we are essential. No matter how militant the class are, no matter how advanced the gains made at any given moment in the heat of the struggle, without the historic overview and programmatic clarity unique to revolutionary fractions, momentary high points must remain cul-de-sacs. We do not believe it possible for a revolutionary programme to be generated spontaneously in the heat of struggle. Without a revolutionary perspective the class, no matter how militant, cannot continue to defend itself on its own terrain.

Without entering into any argument about what precise percentage of the working class is required for revolutionary fractions to be able to carry out their role, it seems beyond debate that a couple of jumbo jets-worth is absolutely inadequate to the task. If the proletariat were to enter its decisive struggles with the current revolutionary milieu, comrades, I think we would have to agree that the game was up. We do not have sufficient numbers and strength to exercise even a homeopathic influence. Even if we were to miraculously acquire the propaganda facilities sufficient to influence a significant fraction of the class, there is no way we could absorb the subsequent influx of worker members. A pre-existing organisational structure is required. The Bolsheviks, with a start of 10,000, managed to cope with an influx of several hundred thousand out of a class of 3.5 million. How could a group of dozens absorb millions?

It was always part of the CBG's understanding that the specificity of the proletariat's existence within the period of capitalism's decadence necessarily meant the isolation of revolutionary fractions from the day to day life of the class. We accepted that that probably meant a relatively smaller revolutionary milieu than in the run up to the last revolutionary wave and that growth would be slow, perhaps largely confined to the aftermath of high points of class struggle. What was

assumed, implicitly, was a dilute version of the process we saw during the period of ascendance. A slow, ongoing accumulation of those elements and individuals attracted to political and revolutionary work fortified by the converting of elements from those sections of the working class won over by our interventionary work at the high points of struggle. In other words, a slow but definite growth linked to a deepening crisis and growing militancy.

In fact, we have seen nothing like that. We have seen no growth, no gradual accumulation. All we have seen through the entire life of this milieu is a trickle of individuals and a handful of grouplets with a handful of members each, in total, insufficient to make up for our losses.

It has to be said that this is not a temporary phenomenon, nor is it confined to the lifetime of the current milieu. Since the death of the last revolutionary wave, throughout the period of decadence, we have never seen the independent emergence of a significant communist movement, capable of influencing and regrouping significant fractions of the working class.

In the history of the proletariat the emergence of such fractions has been confined to the period of ascendance, when revolutionary elements and politics could function alongside and within mass organs of the class, when the fight for the Minimum and Maximum programmes could happily coexist. As a consequence revolutionaries were a living part of the class and its struggles. They were a fighting element in the day to day life of the class. Their militants and their politics were familiar to the class. The revolutionary fractions which led the last revolutionary wave emerged from the decay of the mass organisations of the Second International which regrouped millions of workers. Likewise, the left communist fractions we trace our roots to, emerged from the decay of the mass organisations of the Third International, again regrouping millions of workers. We have seen nothing on that scale since.

Fundamental to our political understanding is the knowledge that mass organs of the class can have no permanent existence outside acts of struggle in the period of decadence. The specific conditions which produced the Bolsheviks and the KAPD will not exist in our period.

The rupture between the class and its revolutionary fractions in decadence has meant the inevitable diminution, if not actual disappearance, of revolutionary perspectives within the ranks of the class. Militancy, the willingness to resist the onslaughts of Capital is an essential prerequisite of the revolutionary process. But of itself it is insufficient. There must also exist at some level within the class, a belief, a knowledge, that everything must change and that change must be located in the interests of the class. The possibility of revolutionary change, of a communist goal must have some currency within the life of the class. The existence of revolutionary fractions is inextricably and dialectically linked to this. The material basis within which that link functioned in the period of ascendance has disappeared. We know the immediate consequences of that - minuscule fractions and an apparent lack of revolutionary perspective to the militancy of the class.

The question is, can we locate the material basis in our own period which will replicate the significant and vital revolutionary milieu of the

