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Wayne Price

Listen, Trotskyist!

An anarchist leaflet

October 28, 2006

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On October 28, 2006, we attended the first day of a two-day Northeast Socialist Conference: Build the Left/ Fight the Right! in New York City. Despite its ecumenical title, the conference was organized by the International Socialist Organization (ISO) and limited to its point of view. We handed out the following leaflet. The ISO has the same politics as the British Socialist Workers Party and other members of its International Socialist Tendency, although it is organizationally distinct (due to some quarrel). Some of the leaflet is applicable to other variants of Trotskyism. (Full disclosure: I was a founding member of the ISO's predecessor, the International Socialists—having previously been an anarchist-pacifist.)

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You Trotskyists of the International Socialist Organization claim to have the same goal as we class-struggle social anarchists: a worldwide revolution by the working class and all oppressed, against the capitalists and their states (including the remnants of the “Communist” state capitalist regimes)—and to replace these states with associations of councils. But you ruin it because of your methods: your attempt to recreate the Bolshevik Party of Lenin and Trotsky, and to do what Lenin and Trotsky did in Russia. When you deviate from this attempt, it is only to use social democratic methods. We will demonstrate this.

You seek to create a “workers’ state.” But there is no such thing as a “workers’ state.” Engels defined the state as a “public force” which “consists not merely of armed men but also of material appendages, prisons, and coercive institutions of all kinds...” Its officials are “organs of society standing above society...representatives of a power which estranges them from society...The state is an organization for the protection of the possessing class against the non-possessing class.” Does this sound like something the working class can use? All

previous ruling classes have needed states because they were minorities who needed to hold down majorities. The working class and its allies is the big majority. In a revolution, it will not need a socially-alienated, bureaucratic-military, machine to hold down the pro-capitalist minority. It will need the self-organization of the workers and the oppressed themselves: workplace and neighborhood assemblies, federated councils, and an armed people, a workers' militia. This is not a state. Because the Bolsheviks aimed for a state, they ended up with a state—a bureaucratic monstrosity.

The Russian Revolution, led by Lenin and Trotsky, ended up as a totalitarian nightmare. You blame this, not on the Bolsheviks you admire, but on “objective circumstances”—Russia's poverty, the failure of the revolution to spread, etc. All of which was real. But it is also true that the Bolsheviks never advocated multiparty/multi-tendency soviets, workers' rank-and-file management of industry, independent trade unions, etc. By 1921, when Lenin and Trotsky were in power, they outlawed all other parties (and jailed and massacred the anarchists), banned all caucuses inside the one legal party, and insisted that the unions be controlled by the party. It was Lenin and Trotsky who legalized the single-party police state! Stalin built on what they had created. Trotsky and his Left Opposition fought Stalin while agreeing with the single-party dictatorship. Until his death, Trotsky continued to regard Stalin's dictatorship as a “worker's state” because the economy was nationalized.

The topdown, centralized, vanguard party which you advocate is made for only one purpose: ruling a state. We are pro-organizational anarchists, in the tradition of “platformism,” especifismo, and the F.A.I. We believe that revolutionary anarchists should organize ourselves to spread our ideas in unions and other popular organizations. Our aim is to encourage the oppressed to take over society and run it through direct democracy and limited delegation. But your Leninist goal is for the

party to rule society. You think that the workers can come to power only when your party is in power. Implicitly you aim to rule for the workers. Well, your party may come to power, but only to rule over the workers.

Like your fellow Trotskyists of the Spartacist League, your goal is a centralized party, ruling a centralized state, managing a centralized planned economy, ultimately on an international scale. This would be a monstrosly bureaucratized, inefficient, and oppressive system. Instead we propose federated associations, decentralized communities and regions, worker-run industries—all planned from the bottom up by negotiation among councils.

Your centralized, authoritarian, political philosophy affects everything the ISO does. You have developed a deserved reputation for being manipulative and controlling, and for vacillating between sectarianism and opportunism. For example, you have actively built Ralph Nader's campaigns, with and without the Green Party. Leaving aside our anarchist anti-electoralism, Marx, Lenin, and Trotsky advocated electoral activity only to develop the political independence of the working class (which did not work out very well, considering the history of the Social Democratic and Communist parties). Nader is a supporter of capitalism and its state, as is the liberal Green party these days. They are trying to create a liberal, third capitalist, party. For the ISO to campaign for Nader was to cross the class line. You did it to build the ISO, not out of any principle.

Similarly in the labor movement: Your announcement for this Northeast conference says, "This past year has been an exciting time for labor...The Transit Worker's Union in NYC defied the draconian 'Taylor Law' and went on strike, inspiring workers throughout the tri-state and the nation. Forced back to work by the the MTA ...they organized their rank and file for a successful, surprise 'no vote' on [the] contract. " This fails to mention the TWU bureaucracy which could have gone on "defying" the state, but which chose instead to cave in, to betray

their workers, and to demoralize many workers—so that they eventually voted for the contract.

In the antiwar movement, you have called for Support to the Resistance! It is right to express solidarity with the oppressed people of Iraq and Lebanon against U.S. imperialism. It is wrong to use these slogans which imply (to almost everyone) political support for nationalist, pro-capitalist, and misogynist leaders. Revolutionaries should participate in all popular movements, to build them, while raising our own internationalist working class politics—in opposition to the pro-capitalist leaderships.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Marxism has been discredited for many people. Instead the radical impulse has flowed into the historic other radicalism, Anarchism. But the basic ideas remain: the evils of capitalism, the need to smash the state, the importance of the working class, the value of other rebellious forces (women, GLBT, racially and nationally oppressed, etc.) , the fight against imperialism, the need for international revolution—and the need to build a revolutionary organization to fight for these ideas. Trotskyism just isn't the right program for the revolution.