

To Hell with Democracy?

*Communist League of Tampa
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Written by Donald Parkinson for the Communist League of Tampa's blog, <https://web.archive.org/web/20150907052828/https://communistleagueoftampa.org/2015/08/28/to-hell-with-democracy/>.

Rather than blanket rejection or blind leftist worship, communists should aim for a more nuanced position on democracy that recognizes its importance in working class organizations as well as its limitations.

Almost every leftist worships at the altar of democracy but is very unclear about what it means or why exactly we need it. Some, taking up an "ultra-left" position influenced by the likes of Bordiga, Camatte and Gilles Dauvé take a stance contrary to this and argue for a complete rejection of democracy, claiming it to be a purely bourgeois form. Against both the blind leftist worship of democracy and the flat out rejection of it by many ultra-left communists I'll attempt here to argue for a more nuanced take on the democratic question.

The question of democracy is a question that communists need to address with care and precision. We need to define our terms carefully and be careful to avoid purely semantic debates to map out where legitimate differences arise and where they are purely questions of how things are worded. Is democracy merely a bourgeois mirage that we should fully reject? Is the dictatorship of the proletariat, the phase of working class rule to abolish capitalist relations, democratic in character? Answering these questions requires a closer look at what democracy actually is and what it means in different contexts. They are also questions that carry immediate relevance, not a matter of abstractly imagining a far off communist future that has no major importance today (what some would call 'LEGO socialism'). Today, when the left is dominated either by bureaucratic and corrupt sects or activist cliques dominated by the informal rule of charismatic individuals, such matters are practical questions that relate to how we organize now.

Communist organizations as well as other institutions of the working class need to be able to make collective decisions on a mass scale. For organizations to truly express the will of its base and therefore the proletariat as a class there must be a basic adherence to the notion that decisions are made by the entire group, that essentially everyone has a say and participates in the decision making process, even if this is through delegation and representation. Furthermore it entails accountability and transparency in decision making processes, not merely procedural norms like voting or majority rule. This is the definition of democracy that communists should stand for, rather than bourgeois notions of democracy which are really just rule-of-law constitutionalism. It's also the definition of democracy that the Communist League of Tampa and its affiliates call for in our basic Points of Unity: "*We uphold the right to open debate, factions and accountable collective decision-making within revolutionary organizations, especially our own. This means opposing bureaucratic centralism and working against the development of unaccountable*

caste-like layers of leadership.”

Individuals with unaccountable decision making power within an organization are essentially small-proprietors, with the organization being their property. It is unavoidable that decision-making authority will have to be delegated to certain individuals, as not every single decision made can be voted on in larger bodies. What matters is that these individuals who are delegated decision-making authority are accountable to those affected by these decisions. This decision-making power, essentially intellectual property in the form of specialization and control over information, must be collectivized. There is not one formal mechanism that can guarantee achieving this (such as majority rule), but as a minimum requirement the basic standards of accountable democratic decision-making must be the general basis for how our organizations conduct themselves.

Basic democratic standards of operation are not important because of abstract universal principles, but because they are necessary for the healthy functioning of organizations that are capable of organizing the proletariat to act as a class. Democracy for communists isn't an ahistorical ideal, but an instrument. That said, it's an instrument we can't afford to not use. Organizations that do not function with internal democracy will develop a layer of unaccountable bureaucrats who are essentially small proprietors which have objective class interests alien to the proletariat. They are not representatives of an alien class due to their specific political lines but because they essentially treat organizations as a form of property and will have a tendency to protect this property. This in turn will lead to a silencing of all dissent within the organization, capitulation to reformist politics in order to keep organizational growth at a maximum and meaningless splits due to bureaucrats aiming to maintain control over what they see as their property when they can't get their way. From there it's a straight road to racket-ville, where organizations are either completely ineffective or so hindered by corruption that we would prefer them *not* to be effective.

It is also of importance that people are free to criticize decisions and voice alternatives without being silenced or expelled. The “Leninist” notion that disagreements within the organization should only be expressed internally while externally one can only express the official party line should be rejected. Rather than this, debates within the organization should be performed in the public press or in public meetings unless they are regarding information that puts individuals at risk of repression. The notion that “freedom of debate” merely opens the door to opportunism is more often than not a means for the central leadership to silence criticism, enforce rigid ideological centralism and assert control over what they see as their property. Of course reactionary positions can be defended under the guise of “freedom of debate” but it is important for any collectivity to come to a general agreement on where the margins of acceptable debate lie.

The unhindered rule of bureaucracy affirms the mental/manual division of labor which is at the core of class society and must be abolished in the future communist society. While our organizations will never be able to fully prefigure communism (as they exist under the structural pressures of capitalist society), the communist movement must *relatively* prefigure the kind of society we fight for. If our movement is to show a way forward out of capitalism towards a better world and capture the support of millions of workers it must in some sense prove that life after the revolution won't be a repeat of current miseries. It is partially because of the failures of Stalinism and labor-bureaucracies in the 20th century that class consciousness today is inhibited. Workers aren't stupid, and if our movement presents itself as a repeat of the bureaucratic rackets and personal tyrannies that define Stalinism, the bourgeois state and capitalist enterprises they won't be interested (and rightfully so). As a result communists as a force in society cannot afford to organize through bureaucratic structures that directly reproduce the divisions of class

society. The only alternative to this is to produce democratic structures.

Not only must our organizations pre-revolution be democratic in the sense described above, but the form of the state under the dictatorship of the proletariat must also be democratic. To quote Lenin, "...*Dictatorship does not necessarily mean the abolition of democracy for the class that exercises the dictatorship over other classes; but it does mean the abolition of democracy (or very material restriction, which is also a form of abolition) of democracy for the class over which, or against which, the dictatorship is exercised.*" Dictatorship in the sense that Marx used it was not to be counterposed to proletarian democracy but relied on it.

The dictatorship of the proletariat, contrary to the claims of anti-communists, is not the rule of a minority clique above the proletariat. This point is made many times but it nonetheless stands. If the working class is going to politically rule it must be legitimately in control of the state. This 'commune-state' must be organized and function in such a way as to prevent the petty-bourgeois labor bureaucracy from expropriating political power from the working class. This will require democratic norms such as representation through recallable delegates, strict term limits and freedom of speech (though in civil war situations it is inevitable exceptions will have to be made for this rule). These were the characteristics that Marx praised the Paris Commune for holding.

While using democratic forms, the rule of the proletariat is a dictatorship and anti-democratic in the sense that it must break with bourgeois constitutionalism and repress capitalist property rights that are considered basic freedoms in the eyes of the bourgeois ideology. An expansion of political freedom to the proletariat can only be coincided with restricting the political freedom of the propertied classes. This will certainly mean taking measures that will be seen as dictatorial in the eyes of the exploiters. It is for this reason that Engels claimed that democracy would be the rallying call of the counter-revolution. Yet democracy for the bourgeoisie is mostly that: a rallying cry, a means of legitimizing their class rule through the state that is never extended more than is necessary.

Rather than the logical form of capitalist rule *as such*, there is much reason to believe that for the capitalist class democracy is just as much a liability as it is means of legitimation to integrate antagonistic classes. Democracy plays an ideological role in the bourgeois revolutions to unite "the people" (the peasantry, other small producers, semi-proletarians and the bourgeoisie) as a whole against the aristocracy and clergy under the banner of the national republic. Through the ideology of democracy the bourgeoisie aims to present its rule as the rule of the entire people, not a single class. Yet too much substantive democracy where the oppressed classes are actually given real participation in political decision-making proves to be a liability to bourgeois rule and must be suppressed. We see this in the French Revolution, with the suppression of the Sans-Culottes and then the suppression of the Jacobins followed by the rise of the Directory and then Bonaparte. We also see this in the suppression of the radical abolition-democracy during Reconstruction in the United States when the Industrialists who were the backbone of the Republican party feared the growing power of the laboring classes. This tendency is also visible in the rise of fascist regimes during the inter-war period, where sections of the bourgeoisie threw in their lot with anti-democratic political movements to crush both parliamentary and extra-parliamentary workers movement. So while democracy certainly plays an important role in the ideological arsenal of the capitalist class it is also something they are more than willing to do without and suppress when needed. For the capitalists class political democracy is a means of masking its rule as a class under the guise of political freedom. Yet at the same time they recognize that too much of this political freedom in the form of substantive democracy is dangerous and must be kept in check.

Despite the fact that the proletariat very much needs political democracy to organize and rule as a class there is certainly a danger of fetishizing democracy, making the mistake of thinking that democratic forms as such are revolutionary and desirable without class content. This is the strength of the ultra-left critique of democracy, which is that a fetishization of democracy emphasizes procedural form at the expense of actual political content. These critiques have their root in the works of Italian Communist Amadeo Bordiga, who went as far to claim he rejected the democratic principle and argued that a vague notion of 'organic centralism' where democracy would be transcended should be the core principle of communist organization. The roots of these critiques can also be found in the works of Marx and Engels themselves. For example, in the 1850 Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League, Marx and Engels warn the workers they "*should not be led astray by empty democratic talk about the freedom of the municipalities, self-government, etc in a country like Germany, where so many remnants of the Middle Ages are still to be abolished.*" In an 1884 letter to August Bebel, Engels claimed "*In any case our sole adversary on the day of crisis and on the day after the crisis will be the whole of the reaction which will group around pure democracy, and this, I think, should not be lost sight of.*" So while Marx and Engels certainly recognized the importance of democracy and advocated it in its most radical forms they were no fetishists of democracy that viewed it as always inherently progressive to the goals of the proletariat. It always exists within a certain class context and must be understood with that in mind.

The problem of fetishizing democracy can be exemplified with a simple thought experiment. Imagine a political change which merely involved simply implementing a form of localized direct democracy in place of the current state, as imagined by Murray Bookchin's 'libertarian municipalism'. In many contexts this would result in a *less* liberatory society than the one we currently live in. For example, in the United States a system of decentralized direct democracy without a change in class relations could simply result in suburban communities choosing to pass laws allowing for segregation or banning abortion.

Modern proponents of "direct democracy" seem to overlook these problems and argue for a form of democracy without the mediation of representation and political parties. This ideal of decentralized mass assemblies making all political decisions is appealing to those disenchanted by the betrayals of political parties and the emptiness of bourgeois democracy. Rather than governance through representative institutions, local face-to-face assemblies are suggested as a more legitimate form of social decision-making. Yet mass society cannot make decisions purely at the local level, and even at a local level the complexity of society would make it unfeasible to put every decision up to a popular vote. This isn't to say that localities shouldn't have control over decision-making, and in fact there should be self-government of localities to whatever extent is possible. But beyond this the need for decision-making at larger regional and international levels necessitates forms of political representation and mediation, as well as centralization. The question shouldn't be whether or not there is representation, but rather how representation can be kept accountable and under the control of the rank-and-file/base.

The experiment of Occupy in 2011-2012 verifies the problems of experiments in direct democracy as well as democracy devoid of any kind of class content. At the core of Occupy was not a basic political programme or class base so much as a democratic form, "horizontalist" consensus decision making. The result was that the project could find no basic agreement on politics and ended up at the lowest-common-denominator of unity. Many camps became dominated by libertarian conspiracy theorists or Democratic party hacks who took full advantage of the fact that democratic process took precedence over any kind of political unity other than the most vague populism (99% vs 1%).

Given the experiences of Occupy and the fetishization of direct democracy by certain currents of modern anarchism, the ultra-left critique of democracy has reason to be taken seriously. Yet there is also a danger of taking this critique too far and completely dismissing the need for democracy within working class organizations. This is exemplified by the text *Against Democracy* by Wildcat (UK) which does indeed take its critique this far.

The text begins agreeably enough with a critique of democracy as the rule of rights and equality, which is premised on the existence of the state and citizens who are atomized into legal individuals. Communism, by doing away with the state and class stratification, would therefore make talks of rights and equality meaningless. It also makes the point that when in combat with class enemies, we don't afford them democratic rights and instead ruthlessly crush them. "*You can't respect the rights of a cop if you're beating him to death! If a trade union leader tries to address a meeting and we respond by shouting him down or dragging him off the stage and kicking his head in, it's absurd for us to say that we believe in freedom of speech,*" says the Wildcat text. So far this is mostly agreeable, though expressing this point in the most edgy possible way does come off as a bit silly. Communists advocate for a dictatorship of the proletariat, which means that certain bourgeois rights that are afforded to the propertied classes under capitalism will be suspended and trampled upon. We don't respect bourgeois constitutional legalism (which is really what they mean when they talk about democracy) and often we are in the minority when we take this stance. The revolution is not going to be decided on in the halls of congress or parliament through a majority vote where 51% of the vote make seizing power legitimate while 49% doesn't.

Yet the Wildcat text goes a step further in saying that democracy "within our own ranks" is also to be rejected. This is defined as three basic principles: Majoritarianism (that nothing can be done unless a majority agrees to it), separation between decision making and action (nothing can be done until everybody has had a chance to discuss it), and embodiment of the view that no one can be trusted (delegates are to be revocable because they may not be trustable). Yet what this is arguing against is almost a strawman, as no organization I know of actually puts every single action performed up to a complete majority vote. There is of course a danger of getting bogged down in formalities, but when decisions have to be made on a mass scale there needs to be some baseline formal process of decision-making to regulate these processes in a way that maintains accountability to those effected. The alternative is either a tyranny of structureless, where personalistic and unaccountable charismatic cliques dominate, or bureaucratic centralism, where an unaccountable leadership calls all the shots and no apparatus exists to challenge these decisions.

The fact that Wildcat extend their critique to mocking the idea of recallable delegates and faction rights further reveals the poverty of their complete dismissal of internal democracy. The argument for recallable delegates and term limits doesn't necessarily stem from the idea that "no one can be trusted" but that delegates should express the needs of constituencies and these constituencies should be able to recall them if these needs aren't being met. The alternative is that the organization is basically the private property of the bureaucrats and there is no means of keeping this in check. And even if the idea behind recall-ability is that people can't be trusted, the argument against recall-ability rests on an idea more absurd than the idea that no one can be trusted, which is people can always be trusted.

Regarding the right to form factions within an organization, Wildcat basically dismiss this as the province of Trotskyists who want "*the freedom to plot and conspire against other members of what is supposedly a working class organization.*" This claim that the right to form factions is basically the territory of "trot wreckers" sounds like something

coming straight from the mouth of a Maoist sects central committee. It was partly the banning of factions in the Bolshevik Party that prevented it from regaining any kind of genuine connection to the proletariat, and in fact while Wildcat claim to oppose “majoritarianism”, the right to form factions is a safeguard against the problems of majority rule. It is only with the right to form factions that minority positions in an org (which may be the correct position since majority rule isn’t a magical tool for discovering the truth) can be defended and argued for in a way that prevent unnecessary splits and expulsion of any dissent. This isn’t to say any and all factions should be tolerated – for example the Communist League of Tampa wouldn’t tolerate a faction giving critical support to Putin’s Russia or any kind of US intervention in the Middle East – but we certainly would tolerate a faction advocating for a harder stance against electoralism.

Ultimately the Wildcat critique of democracy is useless because it offers no alternative on how to run mass-scale political organizations other than “trust and solidarity”. Instead we are presented a fetishization of militant minorities that act against democratic norms, as if these actions on their own are able to offer a real threat to capitalism. The actions of small minorities coupled with spontaneous upsurges can only lead to a conspiratorial tactic of “invisible dictatorship” ala Bakunin. Rather than elite anti-democratic vanguards that rely on spontaneity, the proletariat must create its own mass scale organizations within capitalism that can pose the question of political power.

Mass scale organizations within capitalism will inevitably develop some sort of bureaucracy of paid full-timers. A small propaganda group like CLT can obviously operate on purely volunteer labor, yet at a certain point organizations will get to a scale and level of activity where the level of work cannot be done on an all volunteer basis. Because we live in capitalism, workers have to work for wages to survive and are limited in how much time they can volunteer to an organization. As a result there will be a strata in any large scale organization that have to work as salaried as full-time officials. As stated earlier this strata is essentially petty-bourgeois because they will treat the organization as their property if unchecked. To counter this tendency there must be standardized norms of democracy, accountability and transparency that collectivize decision making in the organization as much as possible. This is the only real alternative to the rule of experts and decision-making dominated by an elite.

Tackling the ‘democratic question’ requires nuance and precision rather than pseudo-radical sloganeering. Rather than claiming that all democracy is merely a bourgeois mirage that is to be wholesale rejected, communists should aim for a more nuanced position that recognizes the importance of democracy within working class organizations while not fetishizing democratic forms or conforming to bourgeois constitutionalism.