

'Reflections' on Open Polemic

R.C.L.

The publication of the pamphlet, *'from open polemic to the future party of a new type'*, provides an insight into the theory of open polemic as well as the strategy and tactics of the journal Open Polemic.

It achieves this by the selected reprint of editorials and statements tracing the origin and development of Open Polemic. (OP). The intention of the journal can be seen in its full title, Communist Open Polemic for Revolutionary Unity. Anyone taking a look at the political Left would be dismayed by the proliferation of groups, and would ask why can't they unite and form a stronger and more serious political challenge? The need for left unity is often expressed but seldom achieved.

In a sense the unnamed editorial team of the journal are staking out the moral high ground, proclaiming we are for unity why aren't you? But reading through the pamphlet the echoes of that characteristically self-congratulatory, complacent tones as self-anointed guardians of scientific socialism rings through its pronouncements. What is more disturbing is that reading their material there is never clarity on the question of 'Unity with whom? For what?'. It was over a year until OP broadly defined the fundamen-

tals of Marxism-Leninism as: 'the political and organisational principle of democratic centralism, the principle of the leading role of the party and the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the principle of proletarian internationalism.'

(These fundamentals were published in our first issue. OP.)

There may be little disagreement with the orthodoxy of that description, but the inability to illustrate what that would mean in practice, despite the rich experience of international communism, raises concern. Is this a tactical move to argue that adherence to the 'fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism' unites more than should divide erstwhile comrades. Perhaps OP hoped that to draw in unaligned communists and those who were not schooled in reliance upon Moscow News for political line, for it is no coincidence that OP was born in the aftermath of the disintegration of the Moscow-inspired communist movement. The rapid collapse of what had been a surrogate spiritual home had drastic ramifications for those who once drew sustenance there.

Open Polemic was the outcome of a minority held view amongst 'a number of comrades from different political

backgrounds' who came together in the summer of 1990 to discuss the feasibility of producing a discussion journal. Taking inspiration from Lenin's *Iskra*, OP differs sharply in that 'it advocates no one particular tendency', and in 'a period of widespread ideological confusion and theoretical disorder', 'the only way for the journal to succeed would be through the complete independence of the editorial board'. Those involved in the journal see, like the RCL, ours as a 'period of preparation for a future revolutionary situation'. They argued that Open Polemic was the first stage of the revolutionary process.

(We argue that open polemic is the 'first stage'. OP.)

The first issue of the journal Open Polemic appeared in the spring of 1991 with the expressed intention:

'to facilitate progress towards the integration of the revolution, nationally and internationally, through the publication of theoretical elaborations that sharpen the polemic around contemporary revolutionary questions ... (Open Polemic) will not intervene in the movement in any other way other than by facilitating theoretical and political discussion across the movement.'

OP characterises the fundamental political task of the age as the need to recognise that:

'theoretical struggle has to be seen as the immediate practical struggle for revolutionaries.'

From this flows the attack on what is termed 'Vanguardism'. With thirty plus claimants aspiring to the leadership of the working class, OP correctly observes that their existence:

'merely introduces into the class as a whole the ideological confusion and theoretical disorder that already exists among Communists.'

To challenge the sectarianism that riddles the British Left, OP states that the point of departure for its project to achieve theoretical clarity:

'can only be the October Revolution of 1917 and its immediate aftermath.'

OP sets aside the defining history of organisations affiliated to either the Third or Fourth International so as not to exclude participation and challenge the set sectarian mind-think that labels activists as either 'Stalinists' or 'Trotskyists'.

In an editorial (not published in the pamphlet), OP asserted:

'the most revolutionary task is to assess precisely what the body of Marxist-Leninist theory amounts to, so that we enter the next millennium with a very precise understanding of what are irreconcilable differences and what are "merely" shades of opinion containable within the body politic of revolutionary Marxism.'

(Progressing the Polemic. OP No.5)

That these issues have been the source of numerous detailed investigations, policy statements, and historic declarations by various parties of the various internationals is well recognised by anyone on the Left. As other critics of open Polemic remarked: What! A Party without the ghosts of Djughashvili and Bronstein? The attempt to avoid addressing the historical baggage that all organisations carry with them is myopic opportunism; take but one historical event - what OP calls the 'Soviet Events'.

In the wake of the abortive coup against Gorbachev, OP again argued:

'All other differences that divide us into warring factions have become historical by-lines - luxuries of the petit-bourgeois leftist. That sharp differences of interpretation and analysis exist should not be concealed, but that those differences overshadow our common purpose is now impermissible. Our venom must be directed solely at those reformists who masquerade in the clothes of communists.'

(We did not respond to the coup against Gorbachev. OP.)

Now leaving aside the main issue that the main enemy may be the imperialist bourgeoisie, how are we to distinguish the revolutionaries from the reformists?

By the touchstone of recognition and acceptance, OP informs us, of 'a dictatorship of the proletariat led by a single, united communist party'. Nothing new here - Yet the journal sidesteps the issues that are involved in 'historical questions'. The historical experience of building socialism addresses the problems of transition from capitalism to communism in the age of imperialism. The divergence in analysis are numerous and not simply restricted to the experience of the Soviet Union. What about Hungary 1919? Spain 1936? China 1949? Cuba 1959? Kampuchea 1975? Afghanistan 1978? And should defeated military regimes like Ethiopia be included as part of the socialist advance that failed?

Opinions on these and many issues tempers one's political approach and understanding. There are important lines of demarcation such as judgements on the development of the Soviet Union and the world revolutionary process. It was such judgements that initiated the Sino-Soviet Polemic of the early sixties, and led the RCL to oppose the trampling of national sovereignty on numerous occasions. The RCL didn't support the coup against Gorbachev but it was welcomed by those whom Open Polemic seeks to win over. To argue as did OP that 'the very foundations of Marxism-Leninism are under sustained attack' smacks of hysteria: whenever has the bourgeoisie desisted from its ideological offensive?

What grandeur of purpose can the journal claim when it proclaims:

'The Menshevik-Bolshevik divide - so critical to the success of the October Socialist Revolution - must again be re-enacted on a global scale.'

This from a small circulation journal that can not even reach the big battalions of the British left - it smacks of left-wing delusion. Indeed the intention to stimulate polemic fell flat as few organisations would contribute to its pages. To deal with this difficulty, OP embarked (in June 91) to conduct 'polemic-by-proxy' by printing extracts from the publications of 'non-participating organisations'. Alistair Parker of OP argued 'It is not attempting to be the basis of yet another vanguard.' (The Leninist June 91) Yet OP put its analysis forward as the key task and called editorially for 'all revolutionaries to read, study and distribute Open Polemic'.

By August 92, they were on the road to revolutionary leadership claiming that the journal: 'affords the opportunity for the most class conscious, advanced elements in the revolutionary movement to break out of the present impasse.'

Furthermore, there was a basic ingenuity in OP's position. The logic of its argument was the political dissolution of the existing 'vanguard' organisations, and for activists to accept its agenda. Open Polemic was no different in perceiving revolutionary advancement in terms of the advancement of its own organisation.

OP's activists once rooted in the slavish pro-Moscow organisations like the New Communist Party and micro-sect Proletarian had upheld moribund revisionist theories like The British Road to Socialism and bolstered the hold of social democracy on working class institutions. Now, without a word of self analysis on their past political practice, they want to act as if the slate was wiped clean. Cynical detractors of OP can suggest that agnosticism on political issues does not advance the struggle towards: 'the ideological integration of the communist movement as a prerequisite to the establishment of a single revolutionary vanguard.'

Not surprisingly, OP was seen as largely irrelevant by the Left. While it set itself up as a discussion journal, it rejected articles from The Leninist, Revolutionary Communist Group and ILWP as 'promotional' - 'In other words, we think we're right and say so.' (The Leninist, April 91)

By May 1992, Open Polemic saw its interventions as organising forums 'bringing all Marxist-Leninists into closer contact with one another'. The editorial board had itself been denied credentials to a fruitless consultative conference on Communist Unity organised by the Communist Party of Britain in 1991. In the belief that, 'the theoretical resolution of demarcations must take precedence over other political tasks', OP organised a conference on Democratic Centralism.

The logical abandonment of OP's dismissal of the 'vanguards' came with the formation of another organisation from this project, the Association of Communists for Revolutionary Unity. The ACRU supports the endeavour of the journal which began life saying that they had no intention of forming a new organisation. Ironically, the ACRU is not based on what OP rightly identifies as a fundamental principle of Marxism-Leninism, the organisational principle of 'democratic centralism'. What fruit has the project born; the promotion of a united front of communists !

So who has been party to OP's project? Who is it, apart from unaligned individuals, that the editorial board has exercised its discretion to open its pages to in the form of contributions, rather than extracted pieces? It certainly does not appeal to any sizeable Left group *Finsbury Communist Association; International Leninist Workers Party; Iranian Revolutionary Socialists; Mosquito Press; Partisan*, praised as having shown the most aptitude to polemicise with a view to resolve existing demarcations; *Red Action*, who have since been excluded as 'utopians' because of their pro-Marx but anti-Leninist politics; *Revolutionary Communist Group*, who had contributed articles rejected by the editorial board; (not true. O.P.) *Trotskyist Unity Group; Socialist Party of Britain* and the *Workers Party of Scotland*.

Step back to look and see what OP has achieved since the summer of 1990: the production of 9 editions which have contained some interesting arguments but resembles a

series of monologues, and two conferences on basic issues that have been discussed infinitesimally: democratic centralism and the leading role of the vanguard party. Now OP argues that this is necessary as 'leading to the ideological integration of the movement and the formation of a single united national vanguard party'. Many Left organisations will accept the orthodox line on these issues so the unanswered question remains unity with whom and for what?

Periodically the cry of Left Unity breaks out, more often than not as a membership raiding tactic rather than a serious endeavour to breach lines of demarcation. The past history of the RCL has involved the unity of Marxist-Leninist forces into a better political organisation: in the early '80s the CWM/RCL union saw the overthrow of a pro-British line on occupied Ireland held by the old RCL. Then unity was based on a common understanding and perspective of the tasks ahead. Today, to promote unity on 'fundamentalist' positions without elaborating on the practicality of that position is not adequate; merely to say you are for the dictatorship of the proletariat brings one no closer to understanding what is meant, it does not serve the interest of revolutionary unity.

For instance, the RCL, despite its well-advertised regard for the Communist Party of China, could not support the CPC's interpretation of the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre. The RCL agrees with the RCG to see as a fundamental line between communists and opportunists as to whether one supports or opposes the Labour party. The RCG analysis is set out in the informative publication, *'Labour - A Party fit for imperialism'*. Yet the ACRU has three categories of membership which includes members of the Labour Party, and its constitution states that no member is bound by any decision of the Co-ordinating Committee - shades of Menshevism comrades? The guiding principle of 'Open Polemic - Action in Common' presumes: 'a sharp theoretical struggle and ongoing resolution of differences. This is to be accompanied by limited action in common that is gradually extended as the differences are resolved'.

Unity requires agreement not only on aims and objectives, but the methods and means to achieve them. The latter are often forged in the specifics of joint activity or scornfully underestimated as merely 'style of work'. But if you want to experience a pear, then you must eat it: the proof of the pudding and all that ! So what are we to make of the fact that for all the talk about unity, OP has not mobilised its own limited resources for any joint activity, specifically rejecting the RCG's call for work on Cuban solidarity. As it works to its own agenda, OP comes to resemble the very 'vanguards' it criticises as blocking the development of a revolutionary party-building organisation.

For its part, the RCL sees itself as part of a revolutionary trend. We ask: unity on what and for what? Although we disagree with the reconstructed CPGB (a.k.a. The Leninists), they did point out the flaws in the attempt of old revisionists to resurrect themselves.

At the Communist Party of Britain - initiated 'Consultative Conference on Communist Unity' in 1991 the unbridgeable political differences remained untackled. Both the splinter groups from the revisionist CPGB were in profound ideological crisis. They had supported the opportunism and revisionism throughout two decades of organisational

decomposition. They seemed strange unity partners; each opportunistically driven, willingly, it seems to forgo principle to salvage an existence now that the subsidies from the *ancien regimes* of Eastern Europe is at an end. The Communist Party of Britain - former tankies - is tied to the falling *Morning Star*. It was formed on the basis of opposition to the 1978 programme. When they speak of unity, the question must be around what? A reforged communist party is needed but it is not about to spring forth out of the wreckage of those who have a record of past betrayal and failure. Not surprisingly, today both organisations continue their separate slow decline. It is from this history that Open Polemic grows.

The RCL considers the arguments present during the Sino-Soviet Polemic (both internationally and domestically) as the beginning point of our politics. On what basis could there be unity? Where is the acknowledgement of the role of Third World marxists, national liberation struggle, racist oppression or gender subjugation in their politics or behav-

iour? Our circumstances may have changed with an outwardly triumphant capitalist offensive but have they changed or do they cling to the errors of the past? The issue of Left Unity cannot be resolved on the agenda established by those who cannot face their own past.

We don't believe that the League will be the organisation to form the vanguard party, nor do we see any existing organisation that will fulfil that role. What we do aspire to is to be part of the process that will see the vanguard party come into being. We published our Political Platform to demonstrate our ideas wherein the interrelationship of different forms of exploitation, different struggles and different components of the overall movement for a new social system can be understood. It sketches out these concerns as a contribution to an understanding of the way forward. The Political Platform is a base for discussions on the pivotal task that face revolutionaries: the building of a multi-national communist party.

Letter from Open Polemic to the RCL

In response to your extended review of Open Polemic in your publication *Reflections* of June 94, we would make the following points. In the order that they appear:

1. Against your *exclusive* vanguardist question, 'Unity with whom and for what?', Open Polemic poses the *inclusive* question, 'Unity of whom and for what?' and answers: all those who profess to be Marxist-Leninists, in theoretical work to elaborate the fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism as a prerequisite for a future party of a new type. (See our editorial statement *The Central Demarcation for Marxist-Leninists*)

2. Open Polemic was not born out of the collapse of a 'Moscow-inspired ... surrogate spiritual home'. It was born out of the **culminating** fragmentation of the communist movement that had emerged in the wake of the October revolution, a communist movement which also included that segment of which the RCL was part.

3. We do not 'attempt to avoid addressing the historical baggage'. We argue that it is high time to lay the ghosts of our past. To demand the acceptance of particular historical interpretations as the price for unity is 'baggage', which the movement quite simply can no longer afford to carry.

4. You assert that we seek to win over those who welcomed the 'coup against Gorbachev'. In fact, Open Polemic seeks to win over **all** Marxist-Leninists, including those of the RCL.

5. Yes, the logic of our argument is the political dissolution of the 'vanguards', not for the advancement of our 'organisation' as you put it, but for the advancement of the revolutionary movement. It was, after all, the logic of Lenin's struggle to overcome ideological confusion and theoretical disorder from 1894 which involved the dissolution of the 'circles' and led eventually to the Bolshevik establishment of a party of a new type.

6. The contribution from the 'Leninist' was rejected as being 'promotional' because it was a complete, newly published, 20,000 word, party manifesto. But that was over three years ago! Things have moved on since then.

The conference papers, submitted by the RCG and the ILWP, were rejected because the editorial board considered that they did not address the subject of democratic centralism, so they missed the opportunity to address the conference as speakers. Since then, representatives from these organisations have attended our conferences and both have had **all** their contributed material published in Open Polemic. In fact, the RCG 'paper' was published as a contribution in O.P. No.7.

Red Action, referred to later, was not *excluded* because it was never *included*. As it opposes the leading role of the party and democratic centralism, its material is published at our discretion.

7. Open Polemic was **not** denied credentials for the Communist Unity Conference organised by the CPB over two years ago, where we intended to put forward our strategy for revolutionary unity against vanguardism. On principle, we refused to accept credentials on the basis of the vetting of our representatives by the conference organisers.

8. The RCL is wrong in respect to the ACRU. We repeat that this **association** for action in common is obviously **not** another (vanguardist) organisation and was never intended to be.

9. Concerning support for the strategy of Open Polemic. A correct line cannot be determined by the measure of support it enjoys at any given moment in time, for any line, and that includes the general line of Open Polemic, no matter how correct, has to be put into effect and in that struggle there will be both advances and setbacks.

Lenin in 1894 considered that the first duty of communist revolutionaries was to overcome the parochialism of the Marxist 'circles'. In 1994, the first duty of communist revolutionaries is to overcome the parochialism of the Marxist-Leninist 'vanguards'. This is a formidable task for the leaderships of the main disciplined 'vanguards' are determined to maintain their own organisation's presumption of the leading role.

10. The RCL is partly correct in pointing out that, 'merely to say you are for the dictatorship of the proletariat brings one no closer to understanding what is meant, it does not serve the interest of revolutionary unity.' This is precisely why we need to assess and elaborate upon the fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism. Not only are there differences concerning the dictatorship of the proletariat, there are crucial differences concerning the definition of the proletariat. Without clarification on these fundamental questions, there can be no clarification on how the dictatorship of the proletariat should be upheld and communists wind up talking at cross purposes on such issues as 'Tiananmen'.

11. The well publicised, three categories of membership for the ACRU all require support for the dictatorship of the proletariat and proletarian internationalism. We therefore reject the notion that the ACRU is somehow embracing the Labour Party and drifting towards social democracy.

12. You assert that Open Polemic 'has not mobilised its own limited resources for any joint activity'. But we **have** done just that. Firstly, by publishing the journal Open Polemic, convening conferences and we are now considering further developments here.. And, secondly, by initiating the Association of Communists for Revolutionary Unity. The RCL should note that as part of its anti-imperialist work, the ACRU supports solidarity with Cuba.

The R.C.G. called on 'the comrades assembled in Open Polemic to take common action as communists in defence of *socialist* Cuba against the US blockade.' (our emphasis) We therefore considered it inappropriate to comment on the ideological and political position of the RCG on Cuba. (O.P. No.8) The RCG, in fact, rejected affiliation to the ACRU where it could have pursued its concern for common action in defence of Cuba.

13. You declare that the CPB and the NCP 'had supported the opportunism and revisionism throughout two decades of organisational decomposition' of the old CPGB, and then, without any foundation whatsoever, you assert that 'It is from this history that Open Polemic grows'.

You follow up this hoary old tactic of insinuating opportunist and revisionist guilt by a non-existent, past association with the convenient assertion that the issue of unity, 'cannot be resolved on the agenda established by those who cannot face their own past'. This you believe excuses you from participation in open polemic, enabling you to still claim before your loyal supporters that the RCL aspires 'to be part of the process that will see the vanguard party come into being'.

You say that 'Any dialogue requires an airing of the base line so a firm foundation can be built ...'. It seems to us that unfounded assertions about the supposed past political practices and associations of the members of an editorial board, of which you have absolutely no first hand knowledge, is your idea of a 'base line'.

You are right in saying that, 'if you want to experience a pear, then you must eat it', so to experience the pear of 'Open polemic - Action in Common', then the RCL should 'eat it'.