

CONSTITUTION  
OF THE  
REVOLUTIONARY  
WORKERS LEAGUE, U.S.

and its position on

Democratic Centralism

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JOIN THE LEAGUE!

# WHAT WE STAND FOR

## THE REVOLUTIONARY WORKERS LEAGUE RECOGNIZES:

That in capitalist society the lot of the working class is exploitation, economic and political oppression, poverty and the horror of ever-recurring imperialist war;

That for the working class there is no escape from this fate except through the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist system which, with its destructive wars, chronic crises and permanent paralysis of immense productive forces cannot play a socially useful role;

That the capitalist state is an instrument in the hands of the capitalists for the subjugation of the workers; an instrument of the dictatorship of the exploiters over the exploited, either masked as a "democratic" government, or openly revealing its true role as a fascist or military government;

That the interests of the workers can never be reconciled with the interests of their oppressors and exploiters; and that, consequently, between these two classes a class struggle must go on until the working class overthrows the capitalist class;

That the emancipation of the working class can be attained only by the working class itself.

## RECOGNIZING THESE THINGS TO BE TRUE, THE REVOLUTIONARY WORKERS LEAGUE IS DEDICATED TO THE FOLLOWING AIMS:

The relentless waging of the class struggle to develop it into the proletarian revolution;

The establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat as the instrument for the construction of communism, a classless society based on collective work and ownership of the means of production;

The establishment of the council (Soviet) form of government;

The building of a revolutionary party as the leader of the working class in the daily class struggle and in the proletarian revolution. Since the emancipation of the working class is the task of the workers of all countries, the League strives to build a world party, uniting the revolutionists of all countries in the Communist Fourth International;

When the workers are called upon to go to war in defense of imperialist interests, the League will strive to persuade the workers to turn their arms against the imperialists of "their" country, to turn the imperialist war into a civil war to overthrow capitalism.

WORKERS WHO ARE IN AGREEMENT WITH THESE AIMS AND ARE WILLING TO WORK FOR THEM, SHOULD JOIN THE REVOLUTIONARY WORKERS LEAGUE.

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C O N S T I T U T I O N

OF THE REVOLUTIONARY WORKERS LEAGUE, U.S.

AS AMENDED BY THE THIRD CONVENTION, APRIL 30-MAY 2, 1938.

FOREWORD

This constitution is based on the concept of democratic centralism formulated and applied by the Bolshevik party under Lenin and developed since his death on the basis of the experience of the Soviet Union and the world revolutionary movement. Its provisions are concretizations of the resolution on democratic centralism adopted by the Third Convention of the Revolutionary Workers League. Whenever interpretation of its provisions shall be necessary they shall be interpreted in the spirit and letter of that resolution.

But it shall be borne in mind that that resolution was written and adopted during the course of a struggle against bureaucratic theories and practices and, therefore, puts a strong emphasis on the defense of the democratic content of democratic centralism. This necessary and justifiable emphasis shall not be used either as a basis for interpretations or justification for a struggle against Communist centralism nor as a basis for interpretations or justification for bureaucratic practices.

And it shall be borne in mind that the situation of the League and its size make necessary practical modifications of certain of the provisions of the constitutions of Lenin's day and of more recent times. Their present form has been determined by their practicality in effecting the broad principles defined in the resolution on democratic centralism. So should it be with their future amendment as the League grows in numbers and in leadership of workers in the class struggle.

ARTICLE 1 - NAME AND PURPOSE

Section 1 - The name of this organization shall be: REVOLUTIONARY WORKERS LEAGUE, U.S. Its purpose shall be the organization of a revolutionary Marxian, that is, a Communist party; the education and organization of the working class for the overthrow of capitalism, establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the establishment of a Communist society.

ARTICLE 2 - MEMBERSHIP

Section 1 - The qualifications for membership shall be: acceptance of the principles and discipline of the League; sustained and active participation in its work. The social composition of the League must be decisively working class at all times.

Section 2 - Applicants for membership shall pay an initiation fee of fifty cents and sign an application card, reading as follows:

"The undersigned, having read the constitution and program of the Revolutionary Workers League, declares his adherence to the principles of the League, agrees to submit to the discipline of the League, as stated in its constitution, and pledges himself to engage actively in its work."

Application cards must be endorsed by two members who have been members for not less than three months.

Section 3 - Applications for membership shall not be finally accepted until three months after presentation to the unit, and, in the meantime, the applicant, if accepted on probation, shall pay dues; shall attend meetings and classes; and shall have a voice but no vote. Proviso: this rule shall not apply to the charter members of new units.

Section 4 - Every member must join a duly constituted unit of the League. There shall be no members-at-large in cities where there are established units. But in cities where there are no units, workers may join by application to the Central Committee Bureau, which shall pass upon each application. A member may transfer from one unit to another only with the permission of the duly constituted bodies of the League. A transfer must be entered on the membership card of the member.

Section 5 - All members of the League must make periodic reports of their activities, which shall be incorporated into the records of the organization.

Section 6 - The basic rights of membership shall be: the right to vote; the right to present views in the organization; and the right to be elected to leading bodies. These rights shall be exercised within the restrictions made necessary by the centralist structure and procedure of Communist organization. They may be abrogated only on grounds - and by procedure - defined in this Constitution.

Abrogation of these rights by the leading bodies of the League in violation of the grounds and the procedure defined in the Constitution shall constitute bureaucratic suppression of the democratic content of democratic centralism and violation of the Constitution; and shall be fought in the channels which are defined in this Constitution and which have been included in it for the express purpose of protecting these rights against bureaucratic attacks on them.

Section 7 - The highest authority in the League is the membership which delegates rights and powers to its leadership whom it elects and removes. The League convention is the highest expression of the will of the membership.

### ARTICLE 3 - DUES

Section 1 - The dues shall be fifty cents a month for employed members and ten cents a month for unemployed members. Members of the

League's youth organization shall pay, on request, the difference between the dues in the youth organization and the dues in the League.

Section 2 - No member can be exempted from the payment of dues. But a unit may pay the dues for those members who are not able to do so. Members who are three months in arrears in the payment of dues shall cease to be in good standing and shall lose their vote until they are up to date. Members who are six months in arrears, shall be stricken from the rolls of the League. These provisions shall apply equally to rank-and-filers and to leading members whose responsibility is greater. A member can be stricken from the rolls only by the highest body of which he is a member.

#### ARTICLE 4 - STRUCTURE

Section 1 - It is the aim of the League to establish the shop unit as the basis of the League structure. In the present period the territorial unit shall be the transitional form of organization. When the League has three or more members in one shop, mine, mill, factory, a shop unit shall be established.

Section 2 - The basic unit of the League shall consist of not less than three members nor more than twenty-five. Each unit having more than five members shall elect an executive committee which shall be less in number than one-half of the unit membership.

Section 3 - Meetings shall be conducted in the English language. Language branches and language federations are prohibited.

Transitional units of members speaking a foreign language can be organized where no regular unit exists, until, either a regular unit is constituted or a sufficient number who speak the English language join the transitional unit, thereby enabling the unit to be integrated into the League structure. It shall be compulsory for transitional units to conduct classes in English.

Section 4 - A city committee shall be constituted whenever two or more units are constituted in one town or city.

Section 5 - A district committee shall be constituted in an industrial area when there are units in at least three cities. When a district committee is constituted in a city in which a city committee has previously been constituted, the city committee shall be abolished and its functions shall be taken over and discharged by the district committee.

#### ARTICLE 5 - ADMINISTRATION

Section 1 - All leading committees of the League shall be elected and removed by the membership in accordance with the provisions of this constitution. But the Central Committee Bureau shall designate the League's candidates in parliamentary campaigns, and shall be guided by the Leninist concept of selecting chiefly workers. The leading committees shall designate and remove their functionaries, staffs, and the sub-committees which fall within the limits of their authority.

Section 2 - The leading body of the League shall be the Central Committee which shall be elected by the League convention. It is the duty of the Central Committee to execute the decisions of the League convention.

Section 3 - Qualifications for membership in the Central Committee shall be: experience in political and mass struggle, political stability, maturity, responsibility, devotion to the cause of the working class and Marxism, social origin. To be eligible for election to the Central Committee a member must have been active in the revolutionary movement for at least four years, two of which shall have been in the League.

Section 4 - The size of the Central Committee shall be determined by the League convention which shall also elect candidates to the Central Committee, not to exceed, in number, one-third of the Central Committee. Candidates shall have a voice but no vote in the meetings of the Central Committee. When vacancies occur in the Central Committee the Central Committee shall fill them by advancing candidates to full membership.

Section 5 - The Central Committee shall meet at periodic intervals which shall be determined by the League convention. When one-half or more of the members of the Central Committee demand a special meeting of the Central Committee it shall be obligatory for the Committee to meet.

Section 6 - Any member of the Central Committee may initiate a roll call of the Central Committee to determine or change the position of the Committee. A request for a roll call makes it obligatory for the Committee to execute it. But if the roll call is initiated for the purpose of changing the position of the Committee, that position shall stand unless and until it is overruled by the outcome of the roll call vote.

Section 7 - The Central Committee shall elect from its membership<sup>a</sup> a sub-committee not exceeding one-half of the membership of the full members of the Central Committee which shall be known as the Central Committee Buro, and shall have all the rights and powers of the Central Committee between the meetings of the Central Committee. Decisions and positions of the Central Committee Buro shall be presumed to be the decisions and positions of the Central Committee, unless and until reversed by the Central Committee at its next meeting or by roll call vote of the Central Committee.

#### ARTICLE 6 - LEAGUE CONVENTIONS

Section 1 - The League Convention shall be held once a year. Special conventions shall be organized by the Central Committee on its own initiative or upon the demand of units or local executive committees representing half or more of the membership.

Section 2 - The call for the Convention, together with an agenda and the proposals of the Central Committee, shall be issued at least sixty days before the date of the Convention for discussion in the local organizations and in the official publications. Special conventions must be convened within two months of the demand.

Section 3 - When a unit demands a special convention it shall be mandatory for the higher bodies to proceed immediately to determine the position of the membership. To prevent this procedure from becoming an instrument of disruption the determination of the position of the membership shall proceed upward from the base through the city and district organizations. To prevent this restriction from becoming an instrument of bureaucratic suppression the unit or higher body demanding the convention may approach other units directly when the leadership refuses to submit the demand to them; and may set up the necessary apparatus for this purpose.

Section 4 - When it has been ascertained that units representing half or more of the membership are for a special convention and the Central Committee refuses to organize it, the bodies demanding the convention shall have\* all the rights of the Central Committee in connection with the organization of the Convention.

Section 5 - Representation at the League convention shall be based on the total membership in good standing at the time of the convention call. The ratio of delegates to membership shall be determined by the Central Committee at the time it issues the convention call.

Section 6 - Delegates to League conventions shall be elected only as follows: by units where there are no district organizations; by district conventions where there are district organizations.

Section 7 - The Central Committee shall determine the basis for the election of delegates at the meeting at which it issues the convention call. It shall declare either one of two bases: when there are no disputed questions delegates shall be elected by nomination from the floor and by election at a meeting one week later; when there are disputed questions the Central Committee position shall constitute one political basis and each opposing view can constitute a basis provided it has been presented in or to the Central Committee during the pre-convention discussion.

Section 8 - To vote for delegates to the League convention a member in good standing must be present at the meeting at which the election takes place. Exceptions may be made in the case of members who cannot be present because of League work, hours and conditions of work, or illness - provided they are in good standing, have been active in the League's work, have stated their position on the political issues in the pre-convention discussion period, have sought permission to vote prior to the meeting, and have submitted their votes in writing to the meeting.

Section 9 - To be elected a delegate to the League convention, a member must have been in the League at least a year at the time of the convention call, except in the case of units organized between the preceding convention and the convention call.

Section 10 - The League convention shall elect an auditing commission which shall audit the books of the Central Committee from time to time and report to the following convention.

\*Insert - the right to set up a Convention Organization Committee which shall have

## ARTICLE 7 - DISCIPLINE

Section 1 - The decisions of the elected bodies of the League shall be binding upon the members of the League. The decisions of higher bodies shall be binding on lower bodies.

Section 2 - A member or group of members who dissent from decisions must nevertheless carry them out.

Section 3 - Grounds for disciplinary action shall include violations of decisions, inactivity, carrying information to the class enemy or opponent organizations, cowardice in action, scabbing, employment by the police and other actions and practices which indicate attachment to or reconciliation with bourgeois society.

Section 4 - A member, upon being charged with an offense, shall be presented with a written copy of the charges against him and shall be given sufficient time to prepare his defense. Charges may be made against any member of the League by any member or body of the League.

Section 5 - On being placed on charges a member shall be tried by a trial committee elected by the highest body of which he is a member, and which shall consist only of members of the electing body. But it shall not include either the accuser or accused. A member has the right to be assisted at the trial by only one other member. The findings of the trial committee shall constitute recommendations to the electing body which shall accept or reject them and act on the basis of its position on the findings.

Trial committees can be elected by units or city committees. Control commissions shall be set up by a District or Central Committee to try charges involving members of these bodies and charges by lower bodies against the leading bodies. Control commissions shall be composed of the most authoritative and objective members of the bodies which elect them.

Section 6 - Higher bodies may review and take action on the disciplinary action of lower bodies or their failure to act, either on their own initiative or on appeal by the member against whom disciplinary action is taken. Pending action by higher bodies the decision of the lower bodies shall remain in force.

Section 7 - Disciplinary measures shall be: censure, suspension, and expulsion. Members of the Central Committee may be suspended by the Central Committee but can be expelled only by a League convention.

## ARTICLE 8 - PRESS

Section 1 - The press of the League shall print the League position.

Section 2 - Minority positions shall appear in the press in pre-convention discussions, and when the Central Committee shall decide to initiate a discussion between convention discussion periods. The Central Committee shall open such discussions with its position.



Section 3 - When a member of the Central Committee presents a position on questions which the League does not have a position, or does not take a position, the Central Committee member has the right to present his position in the League press.

Section 4 - The Central Committee shall publish an Internal Bulletin at regular intervals, which shall present important internal and international information for the membership. Disputed issues in the organization can be presented in the Internal Bulletin between convention discussion periods by decision of the Central Committee.

#### ARTICLE 9 - FRACTIONS

Section 1 - Members of the League in trade unions, other mass organizations, working class language organizations, and opponent political organizations, shall organize themselves into fractions for work within these organizations. The work of a fraction shall be directed by the League body having jurisdiction over the League members constituting the fraction. The members of a fraction must work as a unit under all circumstances.

#### ARTICLE 10 - INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Section 1 - The Revolutionary Workers League will strive to consolidate an international body of all groups and parties standing upon the same international principles, as the preliminary structure for the organization of the Communist Fourth International.

#### ARTICLE 11 - AMENDMENTS

Section 1 - Amendments can be made to this Constitution by majority vote of the League Convention.

★ DEMOCRATIC CENTRALISM ★

PARTS I AND II OF THE RESOLUTION ADOPTED BY THE THIRD CONVENTION OF  
THE REVOLUTIONARY WORKERS LEAGUE, U.S.

#### I

Democratic centralism is an integral part of workers democracy. Workers democracy is the system of political relationships corresponding to the economic foundations of the transition society from capitalism to Communism. Like the proletarian dictatorship it develops either to its liquidation in classless society or to its corruption on bourgeois lines, culminating in its suppression and

and replacement by bourgeois democracy in connection with the overthrow of the dictatorship.

Workers democracy is the class means by which the proletariat and other oppressed masses use the workers state as a lever to create socialism and exercise their dictatorship over their overthrown exploiters; and defend themselves against the influence of the latter even in the proletarian dictatorship itself.

The workers must defend their state against the capitalist enemy and defend themselves against their state, said Lenin. The failure of the Left Opposition in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1924 to 1928 to organize the Soviet masses to resist the corruption of workers democracy facilitated the degeneration of the Soviet Union.

Like all institutions and relationships in class society workers democracy rests on class force. The greatest guarantee of workers democracy is the world revolution. Within a single country it is the armed working class. The armed working class is the highest authority in class society.

Workers democracy is the means by which the masses select and control their leadership - the Communist Party - and shape policies. The workers cannot rule without their party. The party, on the other hand, derives its authority from the class. Without the confidence of the class in it the party is reduced to impotence and sterility. The class is the court of final appeal of all struggles in the party, which in the last and fundamental analysis, are struggles between the interests of the proletariat and the interests of its class enemies.

## II

Democratic centralism is the application of the principle of workers democracy to the special function of the revolutionary, Marxist party in the solution of the problems of the working class. The main problem is the same: the relations of leadership to membership, of centralism to democratic rights within the framework of their fundamental relation to the capitalist class.

Our concept can be summed up as follows:

Marxism includes both theory and practice. The theory and program of Marxism includes the theory of democratic centralism. The practice of Marxism includes the practice of democratic centralism. Opportunism which expresses the influence and interest of the class enemies of the proletariat includes theoretical revisionism and bureaucracy. Bureaucracy is the practice of revisionism. It may precede or follow revisionism, in theory. In either case it is an instrument by which opportunism corrupts Marxism in theory and practice.

Democratic centralism is a system of organizational structure and procedure for the following objectives:

- a) To secure the party's unity in action through centralized authority;
- b) To preserve the right of the membership to shape policies and select leadership.

Centralism and democracy are the two integral contents of the concept of democratic centralism. The centralist content of democratic centralism is the means by which the leadership selected by the membership exercises its powers, rights and the authority conferred on it in the discharge of its tasks and to secure unity of action in the class struggle for the line of Marxism. Its powers are not unlimited. The authority of the leadership rests on the confidence of the membership, which it wins by demonstrating the correctness of its policy in action. It cannot abrogate the democratic content of democratic centralism. At the point at which it does so, democratic centralism becomes bureaucratic centralism.

The democratic content of democratic centralism is the means by which the membership determines policies and selects leadership. It is reducible in the final analysis, to the exercise of three basic rights; the right to vote, the right to present views, and the right to be elected to a higher body. The exercise of these rights is not unlimited. The exercise of these rights must proceed within the limitations -not abrogation- made necessary by centralist structure and procedure. They cannot abrogate the centralist content of democratic centralism. At the point at which they do so, democratic centralism becomes a petty bourgeois democracy.

Against violations of democratic centralism by individuals and lower bodies the organization has ample recourse by constitutional provisions, well established procedure of the movement, the prestige and authority of the leadership, the weight of the apparatus, and the natural inclination of the rank and file to support the leadership.

More dangerous are violations of either discipline or democracy by leading bodies. The experience of the Comintern and the Left Opposition demonstrates that the problem of fighting attacks on democratic centralism from this source is, for the movement, an unsolved problem to which we must attempt a solution--both theoretically and in practice in our organization. The first prerequisite for this is for our organization to recognize the existence of this problem. But there are some lessons we can learn from the experience of the movement:

1) Marxists can never submit to revisionist theory or bureaucracy without ceasing to be Marxists; for in doing so, they must abandon, in the last analysis, the principled need of the Marxists for political and organizational independent action in the class struggle; and they open the way for an opportunist leadership to free itself from control of the masses, and, in a workers state, for its corruption.

2) Do as Lenin did. When discipline is invoked by a leading body to enforce opportunist policies, do not submit to it.

Lenin never tired of holding up as a model of correct revolutionary action Liebknecht's vote against the war credits in the German Reichstag in 1914 which he cast in defiance of the discipline of his party.

At the April Conference of his own party in 1917, Lenin presented his line with an ultimatum to the effect that its rejection would mean a split.

During October, Lenin wrote letters from Finland to lower bodies of the Bolshevik party and to comrades calling for pressure on the Central Committee to decide for an armed uprising. After the decision was made (but not published) he denounced Zinoviev and Kamenev as strikebreakers for taking their opposition to it into the non-party press.

Eight days after the seizure of power at the session of the Petrograd Committee of the Bolshevik Party at which a struggle took place over the question of constituting a "homogenous Bolshevik government" (Lenin) or a coalition with the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries (Lunacharsky-Zinoviev) Lenin said to the latter: "If you want a split, go ahead. If you get the majority, take power in the Central Committee and carry on. But we will go to the sailors."

At the end of 1922, the Central Committee made a serious breach in the monopoly of foreign trade. Lenin wrote to Frumkin and Stomonikov, non-members of the Central Committee, declaring that "this question is of such fundamental importance that in case I do not get agreement of the Plenum, I ought to carry it into the Party Congress, and before that announce the existing disagreement in the faction of our party at the coming congress of the Soviets" which was scheduled before the Party Congress. To Trotsky, who supported him, he wrote in the same vein: "...we will need a short exposition of our disagreement (with the Central Committee) before the Party fraction of the coming congress of the Soviets. If I can, I will write one, and should be very glad if you would do the same thing. Vacillation on this question will do us untold injury."

Other examples can be cited. What has been quoted is sufficient to establish Lenin's attitude. Lenin's conception was that the authority of a leadership depended on its defense of Marxism and could not be used by it to attack Marxism. Hence the discipline of the leading body ceased for him when this body attacked or departed from Marxism on any important question.

The gist of his attitude was expressed in a practical way by Trotsky in his letter to the members of the Central Committee and Central Control Commission, October 23rd, 1923. Trotsky describes how Lenin wrote an article for Pravda proposing to reorganize the Commissariat of Workers and Peasants Inspection, Stalin's domain. The Political Bureau was reluctant to print it. Trotsky says: "The chief argument which induced them to print the article was that an article by Lenin could not be concealed from the party in any case."

3) Do not do as the Left Opposition did from 1924 to 1928-submit to bureaucracy in the name of discipline on the ground that the party is Marxist. In reply to Trotsky's "Lessons of October" Stalin, Zinoviev and Kamenev opened the famous "literary discussion" of 1924-25 in which Trotsky's point of view was distorted and slandered in the entire Soviet press and abroad. Trotsky protested and submitted.

In 1925 Eastman published Lenin's testament and exposed Stalin's suppression of it. The Stalinist Political Bureau demanded of Trotsky that he deny the existence of the document and repudiate Eastman. Trotsky did. In the Platform of the Left Opposition they wrote in

1927: "On the question of the Chinese Revolution, a question of world importance, the Central Committee has not printed up to the present time one word of what the Opposition says. After shutting the lid down tight on the party, and cutting off the Opposition from the party press, the Stalin group carries on against us an uninterrupted argument----." The Stalinists suppressed for years. The Left Opposition protested and submitted. For years the Stalinists appointed and removed the leaderships to and of the parties of the C. I. The Left Opposition protested and submitted. The Left Opposition was removed from posts, hounded and persecuted. The Left Opposition protested and submitted. The Stalinists betrayed the English General Strike. The Left Opposition protested and submitted. The Stalinists betrayed the Chinese revolution of 1925-27. The Left Opposition protested and would have submitted had not the Stalinists acted decisively against them. According to the testimony of Trotsky himself in his Autobiography, the leadership of the Left Opposition permitted itself to be arrested, imprisoned and exiled. Trotsky, too, made no resistance. They protested and submitted. The workers protested. But there was no leadership. So they submitted, too. After their exile "It was proposed to give to the GPU the possibility to follow our inner life; and to see which one was inclined to capitulate---". (Case of Leon Trotsky, p. 331).

The conception of discipline of the Left Opposition was the opposite of Lenin's. It called for submission to revisionism and bureaucratic measures to enforce it as long as in their judgment the organization as a whole was still Marxist. This conception therefore implies the cohabitation of Marxism and revisionism. This formula leads in practice to the exclusion of the possibility of overcoming revisionism and bureaucracy in a Marxist organization by an uncompromising struggle for Marxism (Lenin's practice); and leads to the development of capitulatory and defeatist tendencies; for it posits decisive action on the initiative and responsibility of the Marxists only when the organization is hopeless, that is to say, only when Marxism is already defeated.

A). Since Marxism includes the theory and practice of democratic centralism Lenin's attitude must be applied to revisions in this sphere, too. When discipline is invoked by a leading body to enforce violations of either the democratic or centralist contents of democratic centralism, its discipline is null and void. Rejection of such discipline is not a violation of democratic centralism but a defense of it. A serious organization will adopt this conception and provide channels in its basic documents and its structure for the defense of democratic centralism against such a contingency.

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