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Present Problems of the Workers' Movement: "Discipline, the Principle Strength"

Gauche Communiste de France
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ICC Preface

This text of *Internationalisme* is taken from a series of articles published in 1947 called 'Present Problems of the Workers' Movement'. We refer the reader to the introduction to the first part of this article published in the *International Review* 33. In that introduction we tried to put *Internationalisme's* critique of the organizational conceptions of the Internationalist Communist Party of Italy into the historical context of the post-war period.

Having criticized in part 1 the 'conception of the brilliant leader' which theorized that only certain individuals have the capacity to deepen revolutionary theory, in this second part *Internationalisme* attacks 'discipline', a corollary of this conception which treats the militants of the organization as robots who have nothing to do with discussing the political orientation of the organization. *Internationalisme* reaffirms that "the **only** basis for the organization and for concerted communist action is the consciousness of the militants participating in it. The greater and the clearer this consciousness, the stronger the organization, the more concerted and effective its action."

Since the '40s, all the repeated splits from the original ICP of Italy founded on this ruinous vision of the organization, up to today's dislocation of the biggest of these splits (the International Communist Party (*Programma Comunista*)), have only confirmed the validity of *Internationalisme's* warning about such conceptions.

"Discipline ... our principal strength..."

At the time of the parliamentary elections in Italy at the end of 1946, a lead article – which was really a program unto itself – appeared in the main publications of the Internationalist Communist Party with 'Our Strength' as its title and the Secretary-General of the Party as its author. What was it all about? The disturbance provoked in the ranks of the ICP by the electoral policy of the Party. One part of the comrades, more obedient (it appears) to the memory of the abstentionist traditions of the Bordiga faction than to a really clear position, revolted against the policy of participation in the elections. These comrades reacted more out of bad temper, lack of enthusiasm and practical 'carelessness' in the electoral campaign than a clear political and

ideological struggle within the Party. On the other hand, a certain number of comrades carried their electoralist enthusiasm to the point of taking part in the referendum 'for the Monarchy or the Republic', evidently by voting for the Republic, despite the abstentionist position on the referendum taken by the Central Committee.

Thus, in seeking to avoid 'disturbing' the Party by a general discussion on parliamentarism, in again taking-up the no longer valid policy known as 'revolutionary parliamentarism', the Party has effectively confused the understanding of its members who no longer know to what 'genius' to bow, some participating too eagerly, others too coolly. The Party has blown hot and cold, and has come out of the electoralist adventure in a very bad way[1].

It is against this condition that the Secretary-General rose up with such vehemence in his editorial. Brandishing the thunderbolt of discipline, he cleaves asunder the local political improvisations of left and right. What counts is not the correctness or error of a position, but of impressing the fact that there is a general political line – that of the Central Committee – to which one owes obedience. It is a matter of discipline. The discipline which is the principal strength of the Party ... and of the army, the first NCO to come by would add. It is true that the Secretary-General specifies a discipline which is freely consented to. God be praised! With this addition we are completely reassured...

What beneficial results have come in the wake of this call to discipline? From the south, from the north, from right and left, a growing number of militants have, in their own way, translated 'freely consented discipline' into freely executed resignations. The leaders of the ICP have told us, in vain, that this is the "transformation of quantity into quality" and that the quantity which left the Party took away with it a false understanding of communist discipline. To that we reply by saying that our view is that those who have remained – and most of all the Central Committee – have retained not a false understanding of communist discipline, but a false conception of communism as a whole.

What is discipline? **An imposition of the will of others**. The adjective 'freely consented' is only a rhetorical flourish at the end to make the thing more attractive. If it emanates from those who submit to it, there is no need to remind them – and above all to continuously remind them – that it has been freely 'consented'.

The bourgeoisie has always pretended that **its** laws, **its** order, **its** democracy are the emanation of the 'free will' of the people. It is in the name of this 'free will' that it has constructed prisons on the front of which it has inscribed in letters of blood, 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity'. It is also in this same name that it mobilizes the people into armies, where during the intervals between massacres it reveals to them their 'free will' which is called **discipline**.

Marriage, it seems, is a free contract, so that divorce, separation turns into an intolerable mockery. 'Submit to your own will' has been the perfection of the Jesuitical art of the exploiting classes. Thus, gift-wrapped and nicely decked out in ribbons, oppression is presented to the oppressed. Everyone knows that it was out of love, out of

[1] According to the latest news, the ICP of Italy will not participate in the next elections. So the Central Committee has decided. Is this the result of a re-examination of the position and of a discussion in the Party? Don't be fooled. It is always too soon to open a discussion which would risk 'disturbing' the comrades, as our well-known leader told us. But what then? Simply that the Party has lost many members and its treasury is empty. So, lacking munitions the Central Committee has decided to stop the war and not participate in the **next** elections. It is a convenient position which satisfies everyone and, besides, has the advantage of disturbing no one. It is what our leader calls "the reverse transformation of quantity into quality".

respect for their divine souls, to save them, that the Christian inquisition burned heretics whom it sincerely pitied. The divine soul of the inquisition has become today 'freely consented' discipline.

"One, two, one, two, left, right... march!" Exercise your 'freely consented' discipline and you will be happy!

What is the basis of the communist conception – and we repeat, not of discipline but – of organization and action? It has as its postulate that men act freely in being fully **conscious** of their interests. Historical, economic and ideological evolution condition this development of consciousness. 'Freedom' only exists when this consciousness is present. Where there is no consciousness, freedom is an empty word, a lie; there is only oppression and submission, even if it is formally 'freely consented'.

Communists do not have the task of bringing freedom to the working class; they have no gifts to bring. They only aid the proletariat in becoming conscious "of the general goals of the movement", as the *Communist Manifesto* expresses it in a truly correct fashion.

Socialism is only possible by being a conscious act of the working class. Everything which promotes the development of consciousness is socialist, **but only what promotes it**. You do not bring socialism by the club. Not because the club is an immoral means – as a Koestler would say – but because the club does not contain the element of consciousness. The club is quite moral when the goal you assign yourself is class oppression and domination, because it concretely brings about this goal. There do not – and cannot – exist other means to this end. When one has recourse to the club – and discipline is a moral club – to compensate for a lack of consciousness one turns one's back on socialism, one brings about the conditions for non-socialism. That is why we are categorically opposed to violence within the working class after the triumph of the proletarian revolution, and are the resolute adversaries of the recourse to discipline within the Party.

Let there be no misunderstanding! We do not reject the necessity for organization, we do not reject the necessity for **concerted** action. On the contrary. But we deny that discipline can ever serve as a basis for this action, being in its nature alien to it. Communist organization and concerted action have for a basis **uniquely** the consciousness of the militants who compose it. The greater and clearer is this consciousness, the stronger is the organization and the more concerted and more effective is its action.

Lenin more than once violently denounced the recourse to 'freely consented discipline' as a club of the bureaucracy. If he used the term discipline, he always understood it – and he many times explained himself on this subject – in the sense of the will to organized action, based on the revolutionary consciousness and conviction of each militant.

One cannot require militants – as does the Central Committee of the ICP – to carry out an action with which they do not understand, or which goes against their convictions. That would be to believe that one can do revolutionary work with a mass of cretins or slaves. The need for discipline, raised to the level of a revolutionary divinity, then becomes understandable. In reality, revolutionary activity can only be done by conscious and convinced militants. And then, this activity breaks all the chains, including the ones forged by holy discipline.

Old militants remember what a trap, what a terrible weapon against revolutionaries, this discipline constituted in the hands of the bureaucrats and leadership of the Communist International. The Nazis had their holy tribunals, the Zinovievs at

the head of the CI had their holy discipline: a veritable inquisition, with its control commissions torturing and investigating the very soul of each comrade. A straitjacket was imposed on the parties, imprisoning and stifling every manifestation of the development of revolutionary consciousness. The height of refinement consisted in forcing militants to publicly defend what they condemned in the organizations and organs of which they were a part. This was the test of the perfect Bolshevik. The Moscow trials did not differ in nature from this conception of freely consented discipline. If the history of class oppression had not bequeathed this notion of discipline, it would have been necessary for the Stalinist counterrevolution to invent it.

We know militants of the first order in the ICP of Italy, who in order to escape this dilemma of participating in the electoral campaign against their convictions, or through lack of discipline, could find nothing better than the ruse of an opportune trip. To consciously use guile, deceit with the Party, to disapprove and hold one's tongue, to let things alone: here are the clear results of these methods. What degradation for the Party, what debasement for the militants!

The discipline of the ICP doesn't extend only to the members of the Italian Party, it is also required on the part of the Belgian and French fractions. Abstentionism was something that went without saying in the International Communist Left. So, a comrade of the French Fraction of the Communist Left writes an article in its newspaper trying to reconcile abstentionism with the participationism of the ICP. According to her, this is not a question of principle and therefore the participation of the ICP is perfectly acceptable, though she believes that it would have been "preferable" to abstain. As one can see, a not very 'vicious' criticism – dictated above all by the need to justify the French Fraction's critique of the electoral participation of the Trotskyists in France.

But even this criticism was enough for the offending comrade to be called to order by the Secretary of the Party in Italy. Fulminating, the Secretary declared the criticism of the policy of the Central Committee from overseas to be unacceptable. The accusation of "a knife in the back" was taken up again, but this time it came from Italy against France.

Marx, Lenin said: teach, explain, convince. "... discipline ... discipline ..." echoes the Central Committee. There is no task more important than that of forming conscious militants, by a steady work of education, explanation and political discussion. This task is at the same time the safe way of guaranteeing and strengthening revolutionary activity. The ICP of Italy has discovered a more effective means: discipline. There is nothing surprising in that, after all. When one adheres to the concept of the genius contemplating himself and basking in his own reflected light, the Central Committee becomes the general staff distilling and transforming this light into orders and ukases, the militants into lieutenants, NCOs and corporals, and the working class into a mass of soldiers who are taught that "discipline is our principal strength".

This conception of the struggle of the proletariat and of the Party is that of a drill sergeant in the French army. It has its source in age-old oppression and the domination of man by man. It is up to the proletariat to get rid of it forever.

The right of factions: The internal regime of the revolutionary organization

It can appear flabbergasting after the past long years of epic struggles within the CI over the right of factions, to return today to this question. It seemed resolved, for every revolutionary, by lived experience. It is, however, this right of factions that we are obliged to defend today against the leaders of the ICP of Italy.

No revolutionary can speak of freedom or democracy in general, because no revolutionary is duped by general formulae, because he always tries to bring out their real social content, their class content. More than anyone else, we are beholden to Lenin for having torn off the mask and laid bare the shameless lies covered up by the beautiful words 'freedom' and 'democracy' in general.

What is true for class society is also true for the political formations active within it. The Second International was very democratic, but its democracy consisted in drowning the revolutionary spirit in an ocean of bourgeois ideological influences. Communists want nothing of this democracy, where all the flood-gates are opened to drown the revolutionary spark. The break with these parties of the bourgeoisie which call them-selves socialist and democratic was necessary and justified. The foundations of the Third International on the basis of the exclusion of this so-called democracy were the historic response to this. This response is a definitive acquisition for the workers' movement.

When we speak of workers' democracy, of democracy within the organization, we understand something completely different from the socialist left, the Trotskyists and other demagogues. The democracy which they try to sell to us, with a tremor in their voice and honey on their lips, is the one where the organization is 'free' to furnish ministers to run the bourgeois state, the one which allows you to 'freely' participate in imperialist war. These organizational democracies are no closer to us than the non-democratic organizations of Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin, which do exactly the same work. Nothing is more revolting than the annexation (the socialist parties are familiar with imperialist annexations) of Rosa Luxemburg by the tartuffes of the socialist left in order to oppose its 'democratism' to Bolshevik 'intolerance'. Rosa, any more than Lenin, hadn't resolved all the problems of workers' democracy, but both know what this 'socialist' democracy meant, and both denounced it accordingly.

When we speak of the internal regime, we must be understood as talking about an organization based on class criteria and on a revolutionary program, and not one open to the first advocate coming from the bourgeoisie. Our freedom is not freedom itself, abstract, but essentially concrete. It is the freedom of revolutionaries, grouped together, seeking the best means to act for social emancipation. On this common basis, tending to the same goal, many divergences always unfailingly arise along the way. These divergences always express either the absence of all the elements for an answer, the real difficulties of the struggle or the immaturity of thought. They can neither be conjured away nor prohibited, but on the contrary must be resolved by the experience of the struggle itself and by the free confrontation of ideas. The regime of the organization, therefore, consists not in stifling divergences but in creating the conditions for their solution. That is to say, to promote, and to bring them into the light of day, instead of allowing them to develop clandestinely. Nothing poisons the atmosphere of an organization more than when divergences remain hidden. Not only does the organization thereby deprive itself of any possibility of resolving them, but it slowly undermines its very foundations. At the first difficulty, at the first serious reverse, the edifice that one believed was as solid as a rock, cracks and collapses, leaving behind a pile of stones. What was only a tempest is transformed into a decisive catastrophe.

We need a strong party, say the comrades of the ICP, a united party, which the existence of tendencies, the struggle of factions, will divide and weaken. To support this thesis, these same comrades invoke the resolution presented by Lenin and adopted at the 10th Congress of the Russian CP, prohibiting the existence of factions in the Party. This appeal to the famous resolution of Lenin and its adoption today,

characterizes better than anything else the whole evolution of the Italian Fraction which has become a Party. A policy which the Italian Left and the whole left in the CI rebelled and fought against for more than 20 years has today become the credo of the 'perfect' militant of the ICP. Must we also recall the fact that the resolution was adopted by a party three years after the revolution (it had never been envisaged previously) which found itself in the grip of innumerable difficulties: foreign blockade, civil war, famine and economic ruin within? The Russian revolution was in a terrible impasse. Either the world revolution would save it or it would succumb under the combined pressure of the external world and internal difficulties. The Bolsheviks in power submitted to this pressure and retreated on the economic plane and, what is a thousand times more serious, on the political plane. The resolution on the prohibition of factions, that Lenin moreover presented as **temporary**, dictated by the terrible contingent conditions in which the Party was operating, was one of a series of measures which far from strengthening the revolution in fact only opened up the road to its degeneration.

The 10th Congress saw, at the same time as this resolution was adopted, the crushing by state violence of the workers' revolt at Kronstadt and the beginning of the massive deportation of oppositionists in the Party to Siberia. Ideological suffocation within the Party could only be conceived together with violence within the class. The state organ of violence and coercion substituted itself for the ideological, economic and unitary organs of the class; party, unions and soviets. The GPU replaced discussion. The counter-revolution swamped the revolution, under the flag of socialism; an iniquitous regime of state capitalism was being constituted.

Marx said, apropos of Louis Bonaparte, that great historical events happen twice, and he added, "the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce." The ICP of Italy reproduces as farce what was the grandeur and tragedy of the Russian revolution and of the Bolshevik Party. The anti-fascist coalition committee of Brussels for the Petrograd Soviet, Vercesi in the place of Lenin, the poor Central Committee in Milan for the Communist International in Moscow, where the revolutionaries of all countries assembled; the tragedy of a struggle of tens of millions of men by the petty intrigues of a few village chiefs. Around the question of the right of factions, the fate of the Russian and world revolution was played out in 1921. No factions in Italy in 1947 are the cry of the impotent, not wanting to be forced to think as a result of criticism, and not wanting their peace to be disturbed. No factions led to the assassination of a revolution in 1921. No factions in 1947 are at the most a little miscarriage of a non-viable party.

But even as farce, the prohibition of factions becomes a serious handicap to the reconstruction of the revolutionary organization. The reconstruction of the International Bureau of the International Communist Left could serve us as a palpable example of the prevailing methods. This International Bureau found itself dislocated with the outbreak of the war. During the war political divergences manifested themselves within the groups and between the groups belonging to the International Communist Left. What must be the method for the reconstruction of the organizational and political unity of the ICL? Our group proposed the convocation of an international conference of all the groups belonging to the ICL and having for its objective the broadest discussion of all the questions at issue. Against us, there prevailed the other method, which consisted in muting divergences as much as possible and in exalting the constitution of the Party in Italy – round which any new regroupment had to be made. No international discussion or criticism was tolerated, and a semblance of a conference took place at the end of 1946. Our spirit of criticism and frank discussion was considered intolerable and unacceptable, and in response to our documents

(the only ones which had been submitted to discussion for the conference) they preferred not only not to discuss them, but besides to simply eliminate us from the conference.

We published in *Internationalisme* no. 16 of December 1946 our document sent to all the groups belonging to the ICL with a view to the conference. In this document, we have – as is our old habit – enunciated all the political divergences existing in the ICL and frankly explained our point of view. In this same number of *Internationalisme* can also be found the 'response' of this singular International Bureau. This response says "since your letter once more demonstrates the constant deformation of the facts and political positions taken by the ICP of Italy or the French and Belgian Fractions" and further on "since your activity is limited to sowing confusion and slinging mud at our comrades, we have unanimously excluded the possibility of accepting your demand to participate in the international meeting of organizations of the ICL."

One can think what one likes about the spirit in which this response has been made, but one must recognize in its absence of political arguments that it does not lack energy and decision ... of a bureaucratic sort. What the response does not say and what is to a very high degree characteristic of the truly general conception of discipline professed and practiced by this organization, is the following decision taken in great secrecy[2]. Here is what a comrade of the ICP of Italy wrote us on this subject the day following this international meeting:

> "On Sunday, December 8, the meeting of the delegates of the International Political Bureau of the ICP took place. In reference to your letter addressed to the comrades of the fractions of the ICL of Italy, an official response will be made and sent shortly. In reference to your request for common meetings for subsequent discussions, your proposition has been rejected. Besides, an order has been given to every comrade to break all communication with the dissident fractions. I therefore regret that I will not in the future be able to continue my contact with your group" (Jober, December 9, 1946).

Do we need to comment on this internal and secret decision? Certainly not. We will only add that in Moscow, Stalin evidently had more appropriate means to isolate revolutionaries: the cells of the Loubianka prison, the camps at Verkhni Ouralsk and if necessary a bullet in the neck. Thank God the ICL does not yet have this power – and we will do everything so that it never does – but this is not to its credit. What really [is] important is the goal pursued and the method, which consists in trying to isolate, in wanting to reduce to silence the thought of an adversary, of those who do not think as you do. Fatally, and corresponding to the place that you occupy and the strength you possess, you are led to more and more violent measures. The difference with Stalinism is not a question of nature, but solely one of degree.

The only regret that the ICP must have is that of being compelled to have recourse to these miserable means of forbidding members to have any contact with dissident fractions. The whole conception concerning the internal regime of the organization and its relations with the class is illustrated and concretized in this – in our opinion – monstrous and disgusting decision. Excommunication, calumny, imposed

[2] This is comrade Jober who was then in discussion with us in the name of Turin Federation of the ICP, which he represented. Since then, the Turin Federation, protesting against the method of the Central Committee, has become autonomous and in this capacity participated in the international contact conference. See *Internationalisme* no 24.

silence; such are the methods which are substituted for explanation, discussion and ideological confrontation. Here is a typical example of the new conception of organization.

Conclusion

A comrade of the ICL has written us a long letter, as he says "to unburden himself of everything which has weighed on him, from the anti-fascist coalition to the new conception of the party." "The Party," he writes in his letter, "is not the goal of the workers' movement, it is only a means. But the end does not justify the means. These must be impregnated with the character of the ends that they seek to attain, the ends must be present in each of the means employed. Consequently, the Party cannot be built following Leninist conceptions, because that would mean – once again – absence of democracy: military discipline, prohibition of free expression, infractions for one's opinions, the mystification of the monolithism of the Party. If democracy is the most glorious mystification of *all* times, that must not prevent us from being for proletarian democracy in the Party, the workers' movement and the class. Or let someone propose a better term. What counts is the thing itself. Proletarian democracy means the right of expression, freedom of thought, freedom to disagree, an end to naked violence and terror in *all* their forms in the Party – and naturally, in the class."

We understand and share entirely the indignation of this comrade when he speaks out against the building of the **barracks Party** and the dictatorship **over** the proletariat. How far is this comrade's healthy and revolutionary conception of the organization and internal regime from this other conception that one of the leaders of the ICP of Italy recently gave us: "Our conception of the Party" – he literally said – "is a monolithic, homogeneous and monopolistic Party."

Such a conception, linked to the concept of the brilliant leader and to military discipline, has nothing to do with the revolutionary work of the proletariat, where everything is conditioned by the raising of consciousness, by the ideological maturation of the working class. Monolithism, homogeneity and monopoly are the holy trinity of fascism and of Stalinism.

The fact that a person or party calling itself revolutionary can lay claim to such a formula tragically indicates all the decadence, all the degeneration of the workers' movement. On this triple basis, you cannot construct the party of the revolution, but rather a new barracks for the workers. You effectively contribute to keeping the workers in a state of submission or domination. You engage in a counter-revolutionary act.

What makes us doubt the possibility of putting the ICP of Italy right, more than its actual political errors, is its conception of organization, of its relation to the whole of the class. The ideas through which the end of the revolutionary life of the Bolshevik Party manifested itself and which marked the beginning of its disgrace – prohibition of factions, suppression of free expression in the Party and in the class, the cult of discipline, the exaltation of the infallible leader – serve today as the foundation, as the basis of the ICP of Italy and of the ICL. If it sticks to this road, the ICP can never serve the cause of socialism. It is with a full consciousness of the gravity of what we are saying that we cry out: "Stop! Turn back, because you're heading for a fatal fall."

Marc