

REVIEW ARTICLE

Rehabilitating the Kautskyite centre

Dave Esterson takes issue with a new book by Mike McNair that seeks to rehabilitate Karl Kautsky, a leader of the Second International, and his method of party building

Revolutionary strategy: Marxism and the challenge of left unity

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MIKE MACNAIR is a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). He is a regular contributor to its paper *Weekly Worker* and a speaker on its behalf at various events. His book, *Revolutionary Strategy*, was printed by the CPGB's publishing house. It is on sale at a CPGB bookstall near you. In short the political stance of the CPGB and Mike Macnair are closely identified.

Which raises the question – do the CPGB agree with the “revolutionary strategy” on offer from Macnair in his book? If not where do they differ? We ask because it would be useful to know if they explicitly break with the revolutionary Marxist tradition that is espoused by Macnair or if it is shared by (the majority of) his organisation.

Revolutionary Strategy claims to be the start of a critical re-examination of the “strategic ideas of socialists since Marx and Engels” which Macnair says is necessary to overcome the “impasse” facing today’s far left.

It isn't. It is a “Dear John” letter to the revolutionary tradition telling it that the affair is over because Mike Macnair has discovered a new lover – Karl Kautsky. The book does not re-examine the revolutionary tradition with a view to developing it to meet today’s tasks. It is a rehabilitation of a major critic of the revolutionary tradition in the Second International, the German theoretician Karl Kautsky. It is an attempt to revive Kautsky’s vapid political tradition – the Centre, or to give it its correct name, centrism.

Kautsky's centrism

Kautsky was a classic centrist: Marxist words disguising reformist practice. His practice was a betrayal of Marxism, of the working class and of the fight for revolution.

To achieve this rehabilitation Macnair plays on the ignorance of today’s readers about Kautsky. His actual role in the socialist movement – as the arch apologist for the right – is ignored. His scab role in relation to the Bolshevik revolution is replaced by the claim that many of his criticisms of Bolshevism can no longer be treated as “presumptively false” (p14). Presumably this means they may be true and denouncing a workers’ revolution is alright?

Macnair goes to great lengths to berate the Communist International for its supposedly negative impact on working class organisation in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution. But his rescue job on Kautsky underplays the disastrous impact of Kautsky’s centrism on the strongest working class movement in Europe, the German movement. It was Kautsky who, at a theoretical and at a party organisational level, played a major role in disarming that movement in the face of the rise and eventual victory of fascism.

Lenin called Kautsky, after the Russian Revolution, a renegade. Macnair insists that, “. . . casting out ‘the renegade Kautsky’ cut off the communists from the western European roots of their politics.” (p146) He even entitles one of his chapters “The revolutionary strategy of the centre”.

The fact that Kautsky spent much of his life insisting why the Bolshevik revolution was wrong is not mentioned. The fact that his strategy did not result in a single revolution is not explained. Instead Macnair declares: “The centre’s strategy of patience was more successful than the other strategies in actually building a mass party. Its insistence on the revolution as an act of the majority, and refusal of coalitionism, was equally relevant to conditions of revolutionary crisis . . .” (p65)

Except that it wasn't because, as Macnair admits, “. . . it addressed neither the state form, nor the international character of the capitalist state system and the tasks of the workers’ movement, the centre’s strategy collapsed



into the policy of the right when matters came to the crunch.” (p65)

So this strategy of patience was not so effective after all. Rather, it built mass “Marxist” organisations which when faced with the first major test of a European-wide crisis collapsed and ended up playing a thoroughly reactionary role. This grand workers’ movement proved utterly useless to stop the war – like an umbrella with holes – great until it rains.

There is virtually no analysis of the standpoints the different traditions within the socialist movement took in relation to the class struggle

So while Macnair does occasionally identify some weaknesses of Kautsky, his explanation of how Kautsky came to collapse into the policy of the right is separated from his supposedly correct “revolutionary strategy”. The task today, is to emulate Kautsky’s centre with modifications. The left “needs a strategy of patience, like Kautsky’s: but one that is internationalist and radical democratic, not one that accepts the existing order of nation states.” (p172).

Patient internationalism is not explained. It is an empty phrase. But one thing is clear from this statement. Apparently the goal for Macnair is no longer socialism, but radical democracy, just as it was for Kautsky. And it was fidelity to this radical democratic goal that led Kautsky into his servitude to the right and into his scab role in relation to the Russian Revolution. It will do the same to Macnair, and to the CPGB to the extent that it follows his theoretical line of march.

Macnair regards the strategy of patience as the essence of Kautskyism. He believes it to be far superior to the coalitionism of the reformist right and to what he calls the “mass strike strategy” (a complete and unworthy caricature of the strategy outlined by the left in the Second International such as Rosa Luxemburg).

He extols Kautsky’s strategy of creating parties that would only seek power once they had won the majority to their policies and programme. Until this point these parties would remain an opposition – not taking power, nor allying themselves with the right in coalition. The pre-First World War Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) is the model for today according to Macnair. It built up workers’ organisations – political, trade union, cultural and so on – as an opposition world within capitalism. It stood for radical democracy so that one day it could win a majority and then take power. So powerful and successful was this party that it was crushed by the Nazis in 1933 without a fight!

Whatever bedknobs and broomsticks Macnair attaches to his book, at its core it is an embrace of this brand of Kautskyite gradualism. The problems start with Macnair’s definition of Marxism: “Marxism itself is a strategy for the emancipation of the working class, through collective

action for communism; and for the ‘emancipation of all human beings without distinction of sex or race’ – i.e. for communism – through the emancipation of the working class.” (p38)

That is one element of Marxism. It is the final goal. But there is considerably more to Marxism than this. For starters there is the question of the class struggle, what Marx and Engels called the “motor force of history”.

It is quite remarkable how little attention Macnair pays to the role of class struggle as a factor shaping events. There is virtually no analysis of the standpoints the different traditions within the socialist movement took in relation to the class struggle – of what side they were on – and of what that tells us about those traditions. Everything is analysed abstractly. The strategy of patience is good, we are told. It was merely errors on internationalism and the nation state that led Kautsky astray.

Really? What about his position on the general strikes in the struggle for the vote in Belgium and the fact that – as he did so often in the class struggle – he covered for the betrayals of the right by citing the need for patience?

What about his justification of the trade union bureaucracy’s hostility to rank and file strike action brought to a head in the debates on the mass strike by the 1905 Russian Revolution? Were these examples of Kautsky’s patience – or were they examples of his deliberate dislocation of Marxism from the actual course of working class struggles?

Because Macnair separates the development of Marxism and the socialist movement from developments in the class struggle he covers up the actual role of the Centre – its betrayals – and attacks those who sided with the working class in those struggles, the left and its “mass strike strategy”. He cannot even bring himself to openly side with the left in the great schism that occurred in the socialist movement at the beginning of the First World War, just as Kautsky himself couldn’t.

The split in the Second International

At the beginning of the First World War the majority of the Social Democratic and Socialist party leaderships came out in defence of their own national governments. This was a betrayal of the working class and the International. To put it bluntly they sent off their own members and the wider working class to die for the imperialist, annexationist aims of the major belligerent powers and to kill workers from other countries, possibly also members of the same political organisation as them, the Second International.

Lenin and the Bolsheviks argued forcefully that it was necessary to fight against these treacherous leaders. New organisations were needed to conduct this fight. Major class battles are informed by ideas, but they are fought by people organised into political parties. To oppose the war, to prosecute the policy of revolutionary defeatism and to ensure that real (not patient, i.e. false) internationalism prevailed, a split was necessary and historically justified.

Lenin was not only correct to split from the counter-revolutionary leaderships of the Second International, but was also correct to insist that all of the anti-war left within

Social Democracy should break from the right wing and cease covering up the scale of their treachery.

Here we are talking about millions of lives – Lenin fought for a policy designed to save them. Kautsky covered up for the slaughter. Yet Macnair can barely bring himself to say that this was the correct policy, preferring to say that it was “probably” correct. Incredibly Macnair argues:

“In fact, if we look back on 1914-18 itself, it should be apparent from what I said in discussing the outbreak of war . . . that it was the specific military-political conditions of 1914-18 which allowed Lenin’s thesis [defeatism or turn the imperialist war into a civil war] to obtain the sort of political purchase it did. If the war had been fought on German soil, as Engels anticipated in 1891, a German revolutionary-defencist policy would have been vindicated. If it had been a short war, the issue would have been brushed aside.” (p74)

By leaving out of the equation the rise of imperialism he obscures what the war was actually about, why the possibilities he considers for it are absurd and why, therefore, the policies he speculates about (German defencism) are excuses for treachery. And the extension of these excuses to an attack on the one country that turned the policy of defeatism into the practice of workers’ revolution.

Was it necessary to build independent revolutionary organisations that opposed the imperialist slaughter and sought to use the situation to overthrow capitalism? Was it necessary to expose the treacherous leaderships of the Second International and to purge them, not just from the party, but from the working class movement? Not “probably” – definitely!

The Russian Revolution

Macnair’s analysis of the Bolshevik Revolution demonstrates the essence of his own centrism. The revolution is not explained by any consideration of what happened in Russia in 1917, of what choices socialists had to make in the context of the class struggle. There is no assessment of which of those choices were right, which were wrong. Rather Macnair analyses events from the standpoint of a schema – the need to patiently build up a mass party that can win the majority, establish radical democracy and then patiently and painlessly dismantle capitalism. The class struggle – whose side are you on? – doesn’t get a look in.

From this ahistorical vantage point Macnair concludes that the Bolshevik revolution was “a gamble on the Russian Revolution triggering a generalised socialist revolution in central and western Europe. The gamble failed. In all probability it had already failed by January 1918.” (p13) It’s the Russian Revolution presented as Russian roulette!

The failure of Lenin’s bet, according to Macnair, was disastrous. It led to an impasse for the left and to the sorry state of revolutionary politics today. In order for the Bolsheviks to cling to power, almost from the outset, they began to take measures (and codify them as part of the revolutionary canon) that led to bureaucratisation.

Macnair also criticises the idea that the split within the workers’ movement between Social Democratic and Communist Parties, begun with the outbreak of the First

World War, achieved the goal of purging the revolutionary workers’ movement of reformist and counter-revolutionary ideas. His view is that it just ended up creating the basis for groups claiming to be revolutionary to bureaucratise themselves, split, and produce sects:

“But the ‘victory of the Russian revolution’ on its own, or the course of the revolution after late 1917-early 1918, can no longer be taken as evidence for Bolshevik strategy as a package. What it led to was not a strategic gain for

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the world working class, but a 60-year impasse of the global workers’ movement and the severe weakness of this movement at the present date.” (p14)

No it didn’t. And to say otherwise is to write off the greatest achievement of the working class so far in history – just as the renegade Kautsky did.

First of all to characterise the revolution of the gamble is facile. Every action in the class war is a gamble – for the simple reason that victory is never the guaranteed outcome. If it were we wouldn’t be having this discussion now. But nor would we be discussing the outcome of strikes we have led, actions we have organised, campaigns we have waged. All of these things require two things, neither of which fit in to Macnair’s lifeless strategy of patience. They require first an estimate on our part as to how far we have won over the forces that could achieve victory. They require second, a willingness to test that assessment by engaging the enemy in battle.

Kautsky never wanted to engage the enemy in battle – and nor does Macnair. The Bolsheviks, and the entire revolutionary tradition in Marxism dismissed by Macnair, did. And they developed tactics capable of both winning over the necessary forces and winning the battles. Even though outcomes could not be decided in advance odds could be reckoned, gambles – and history – could be made. The real question is, were the Bolsheviks right to gamble? The answer is yes, again and again and again – first, because conditions in Russia placed the workers’ revolution on the agenda as an immediate task, second, because Europe itself was ripe for a revolution that would have (and could have) taken history forward in a giant leap.

The only solution to the crisis faced by society that could advance Russia beyond war, chaos and famine was the one proposed by the Bolsheviks – all power to the soviets. Only the workers had the power, the will and the means to end war, to break the back of residual serfdom, to liberate the nations of the empire and to free production from the chains of exploitation that served to prop up Tsarism rather than get beyond it. The workers’ revolution led by the Bolsheviks was both necessary and legitimate from the standpoint of taking history forward. Of course, having

the will to execute this course of action was also necessary. And in the Bolshevik Party the Russian workers had an enormous advantage. It combined revolutionary strategy with a will to succeed. To the extent that every action in the class war is a gamble, it was well worth it.

The same was true of the international context. War had made Europe as a whole ripe for a repeat of the events in Russia. Within a year of the Bolshevik revolution there was a German revolution. It effectively brought about the

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end of the First World War, brought down the monarchy and created dual power in Germany. There were other revolutions and revolutionary situations throughout Europe – Austria, Italy, Hungary and so on. There were monumental crises in Britain and France. There was a second revolutionary opportunity in Germany in 1923.

Class struggle, policies, the actions of parties and the triumph of counter-revolutions saved the European capitalists. Yet despite all this Macnair argues that it was the only the actions of the reckless gamblers in the Bolshevik Party who led us to the present impasse. In a certain sense it is axiomatic that where we are now is due to all that has preceded us. Or to put it another way the present day is the sum of all previous historical actions. The problem is what are the numbers involved in the sum.

The Bolsheviks were correct. Other revolutions did follow. It was not primarily the decisions, actions and policies of the Bolsheviks that led to the isolation of the Russian revolution in this period. The German revolution could have ended not with counter-revolution and, eventually, the rise to power of fascism, but with the working class taking power resulting in surge of revolutionary turmoil even more powerful than that caused by the Russian Revolution.

Who was responsible for the failure of the German revolution of 1918-19? It was the right wing, counter-revolutionary leadership of the SPD. Who was in alliance with these people? Macnair's beloved Kautsky and the anti-war Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (USPD). What did they tell the German workers when the counter-revolution stove in the heads of the left wing with rifle butts wielded by the precursors of fascism? That Luxemburg, Lenin and the left were the real threat to ... democracy. That, comrade Macnair, is what happens in class struggle. And it is a world far removed from your lifeless schema of patience and democracy.

That is why you will search long and hard to find any indication from Macnair that the impasse we find ourselves in today was in any way the responsibility of the treacherous SPD right or its apologists in Kautsky's Centre. Instead he heaps all the blame onto the party that

demonstrated in practice that the working class could be won to support a revolutionary socialist strategy – the Bolsheviks.

None of this is to deny that the history of both the Russian and German revolutions were full of errors as well as in positive lessons. But Macnair is not drawing a balance sheet of errors and lessons. He is drawing a line between himself and the revolutionary tradition.

It is possible to re-evaluate the experience of the Bolshevik revolution and the development of the Comintern with a critical eye so that mistakes do not get repeated. We are not against re-examining the past and recognising the errors that were made. But we are against doing this on the basis of abandoning the strategy of revolution to achieve the goal of socialism and replacing it with a strategy of patience aimed at achieving the goal of radical democracy.

But Macnair blames the eventual outcome of the bureaucratisation of the Russian Revolution and its isolation on those who tried to make the world a better place, the Bolsheviks and the left, not on those whose strategy increased the odds against the “gamble” paying off – the executioners of the revolution of the left and their centrist apologists, like Kautsky.

Never mind that the soviets withered because the members died at the hands of the counter-revolution. Never mind that the party was cut off from its base because that base exhausted itself in years of war defending socialism. And never mind that the Comintern, in its early years, expended every effort trying to break the isolation that Russia faced but was blocked by reformism and Kautskyite centrism in the countries where it could have and should have found support. All of this is discounted and the lion's share of blame is heaped upon the Bolsheviks themselves and the way in which they imposed bureaucratic centralism on the Comintern in order to turn it into a “fan club” of Russia.

Such an analysis will be welcomed by every Cold War hagiographer who has ever tried to make their theory of “Russian gold” stick. It is, to misquote Henry Ford, history as bunk.

The rise of Stalinism

Macnair argues that the failure of the gamble in Russia left the Bolsheviks in power in a majority peasant country. Their only realistic option was, he argues, a “controlled retreat” back to capitalism. Never mind that this would have meant death for thousands – such factors never enter into Macnair's consciousness.

The main thing is that once it was clear the gamble had not returned a big pay out, the only option was to leave the gaming table. His criticism of Bolshevism in the 1918-23 period is that by failing to follow his option it left itself with only one other course of action – bureaucratisation. The party had to base itself on the peasantry and increasingly act in an authoritarian rather than a democratic fashion.

To avoid any confusion we will make some things clear. First, not everything the Bolsheviks, and by extension the Comintern, did in this period was either correct, or

justified. Actions such as banning factions were to prove fatal for the health of the regime. The generalisation of the methods of terror employed during the civil war led to profound distortions of revolutionary policy. Attempts, by Trotsky and others, to militarise production and the unions were not only wrong, but dangerous.

But to highlight such errors and to ignore the fact that Lenin, Trotsky, Bukharin, the Workers' Opposition and others, were not only able to oppose many wrong policies but sometimes successful in introducing powerful correctives to them, is to present a one sided and false history of post-1917 Bolshevism. Moreover it is, once again, to abstract both the measures and mistakes from the realities of the class war.

To win the civil war it was necessary for the Bolsheviks to carry through measures of centralisation and repression. Democracy does have a class content. Democracy for the active, murdering counter-revolutionaries would have been a signal that the Bolsheviks were not serious about holding onto power. This would have been a departure from the Marxist understanding of both the state and the revolution. The state, in the hands of the working class – and even in the circumstances of civil war by the working class party – has to be used as an instrument of repression against the enemies of revolution. Democracy has to be suppressed for such elements. Is this the norm – no. Is it a necessary and justifiable departure from the norm – yes.

To put it in simple terms, when workers go on strike, having taken a majority decision, they use repression against scabs. They do not extend democratic rights – on strike committees and the like – to scabs. They recognise that for the duration of the struggle the norms of “respecting everyone’s opinion” are suspended. Why? Because battle has commenced. This happens at a far higher level in a revolution. But we do not generalise from the conditions of war to say that in all circumstances we celebrate repression and suspend democracy. It is an exception.

In the case of Russia this meant forming the Red Army, and the army needed to eat which meant requisitioning grain from the peasants – at gunpoint. If Macnair believes we can only have a successful social revolution where at all times the government is able to rule by consent then he will be sorely disappointed and one can assume that he will be against any real revolutions that actually take place, for there has never been a social revolution without violence and coercion and there never will be.

It is certainly true that elements of the so-called Bolshevikisation policy pursued by Zinoviev in the Comintern ignored the specific conditions that justified extreme measures and spread the idea that revolutionary parties should be monolithic. This in turn was utilised by the Stalinist bureaucracy to impose bureaucratic centralism.

But Macnair conflates all of these elements into one: bureaucratic centralism. It was established in 1918 and it led inexorably to Stalinism. He glosses over the entire struggle of both the United and Left Oppositions and suggests the outcome was all the product of the failed gamble. But then those struggles were class struggles – the representatives of the working class versus those of the petit bourgeois bureaucracy that Stalin was assembling to

prop up his regime. And as we have established, Macnair does not include class struggle in his schema.

On the basis of his Kautskyite view of the party and belief that the immediate goal of the working class is radical (republican) democracy rather than socialism, Mike Macnair is championing a complete break with the revolutionary Marxist tradition. He has every right to do this. But under the Trades Description Act he should be prosecuted from the claim in the title of his book that this has anything to do with either “revolutionary strategy” or “the challenge of left unity”, as the subtitle runs.

His strategy is for a radical democracy that eschews the use of revolutionary strategy and tactics. And there is not a single paragraph in the book that explains why or how the abandonment of the struggle for socialism as the goal of revolution can contribute towards the establishment of left unity.

Which brings us back to the question we posed at the start – do the CPGB agree with Macnair’s position? We should be told.

Mike Mcnair replies

LABOUR MAY be productive or unproductive. The same is true for polemics, but for different reasons. A productive polemic engages with what the target actually says and forces the target to respond to these arguments. An unproductive polemic is unproductive in the same sense as Soviet shoe “production”: the shoes are ill-fitting and tend to fall apart rapidly. Unproductive polemics characteristically merely reproduce the writer’s prejudices.

Dave Esterson’s review of my book is mostly unproductive polemic. It accuses me of saying things I don’t say and of not saying things I do say. It almost entirely ignores my substantive arguments, which he characterises as “bedknobs and broomsticks Macnair attaches to his book.” It displays bravura rhetoric and a posture of “justified anger” – at the end of the day mainly to *avoid* arguing with the book.

To get rid of the 90% of crap I should begin with pointing out two things. The first is that my book is not in any sense about blaming the leaders of the Russian Revolution for its defeat, as Esterson repeatedly claims. In the first chapter I wrote (pp23-24):

“... when I criticise the arguments and decisions of the leaders of the Russian Revolution, I do not intend by this to pass some sort of moral judgment on the decisions they took under extremely difficult circumstances.

“I do not even necessarily mean that any superior alternative was open to them. For example, I said above that October 1917 was a gamble on revolution in western Europe, which failed. But the alternative to this gamble put forward by Martov and Kautsky – a Menshevik-SR government based on the Constituent Assembly – was unreal: the real alternative available was either the policy

the Bolsheviks actually followed, including the coercion of the peasantry to supply food, 'red terror' and so on, or a government of the White generals and 'white terror'. The problem here is not the actions the Bolsheviks took: it is their over-theorisation of these actions, which has been inherited by the modern far left."

This comment is substantially identical to much of what comrade Esterson writes about the Russian Revolution. On this front he merely mistakenly thinks that he disagrees with me.

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The second point is that I am not in any sense interested in "rehabilitating" any part of Kautsky's conduct and ideas from August 1914, when he became a scab – with two exceptions among his arguments, one of which he shared with Luxemburg and the other with Trotsky.

On this front I don't propose to reproduce extensive quotations. Part of the reason comrade Esterson's attempt to tag me as a Kautskyite is a waste of time is because Bill Jeffries already made the attempt in responses to David Broder's review of the book on the commune website.

I replied pointing out the falsity of Bill's selective quotations and inability to see what was before his eyes or read my plain English denunciations of Kautsky. The whole exchange is at <http://thecommu.wordpress.com/2008/08/29/revolutionary-strategy/> and it would be a waste of the limited space available here to reproduce it.

Two exceptions

The first of the two exceptions is the criticism shared by Kautsky and Luxemburg of the extension of banning parties and papers beyond open counter-revolutionaries. Kautsky criticised this – wrongly – at a time when it was only open counter-revolutionaries who were banned. Luxemburg responded to the 1918 ban on the Left SRs, which was to ban the party with the largest mass support after having rigged the elections to deny it a victory (Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks in power*, Ch 11).

The objection, which I share, is that without freedom to organise against the momentary majority, the *proletariat* as a class cannot rule. This criticism is in fact, also shared by comrade Esterson: but he fails to confront the underlying theoretical issues. The logic of going beyond emergency bans to a system of one-party rule did not come from any practical counter-revolutionary activities of the Menshevik-Internationalists, Left SRs, and so on, at the end of the Civil War. It came from the (Hegelian-Marxist) demand for "strict unity of will". This is most clearly expressed by Lenin in his speech to the 3rd All-Russia Trade Union Congress in April 1920 ([http://www.marx-](http://www.marx-ists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/apr/07.htm)

[ists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/apr/07.htm](http://www.marx-ists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/apr/07.htm)), but was argued by Lenin and others in various other places.

The second exception is the view shared by Kautsky, Martov and Trotsky that objective conditions in Russia alone were insufficient for socialism.

By "socialism" all these authors meant, at first, was the state and economic regime which would immediately succeed capitalism, i.e. in Marxist and Trotskyist terms, the dictatorship of the proletariat: this usage of "socialism" for the dictatorship of the proletariat was normal in the Second International. It was only through the Russian polemics of the 1920s that "socialism" came to mean a separate stage *beyond* the immediate outcome of overthrowing capitalism.

Kautsky and his co-thinkers thought wholly in terms of *separate national* development, and therefore concluded that proletarian revolution in Russia (and in Germany, and in Austria . . .) was ultraleft adventurism.

Trotsky – and, in 1917-21, the large majority of the Bolsheviks – *agreed* that the material basis for socialism did not exist *in Russia*. Taking power was therefore – in the words I have used – a gamble on revolution in western Europe. If the revolution does not spread, they said, the Russian revolution will inevitably be defeated. But unlike Kautsky and his co-thinkers, they were clear that the world war posed immediately the question of world proletarian revolution. On this basis, to take the first step in Russia – to gamble on the world revolution – was justified.

On this question I think the Bolsheviks were right and Kautsky and his co-thinkers were wrong and scabs. I have argued this point more fully last year: <http://www.cpgb.org.uk/worker/688/macnair.htm>; the whole series of which this article is part (August 2-September 13 2007) is strongly relevant to the present polemic. I admit that I should have integrated at least part of that series into the book under review in order to make my position clearer.

Comrade Esterson's polemic against me on this question is something different. It is a rerun of the standard Stalinist polemic against "Trotskyism" on this very question: Trotskyism, these people said, amounts to Menshevism because it is "defeatist" about the ability of the Russian working class to win through "class struggle" and insists that only *world* revolution can win.

Tony Clark of the Stalin Society and Communist Party Alliance has been for months polemicising in the *Weekly Worker* letters page against the CPGB (and me), and in favour of Stalin, on precisely similar grounds. He would presumably applaud comrade Esterson's arguments.

If we throw all this stuff out, we throw out with it the whole structure of comrade Esterson's argument in terms of the blame game and the grounds of his angry rhetoric. There remains a substantive issue at stake. Comrade Esterson insists that revolutionaries today should identify with the left wing of the pre-war Second International as opposed to its centre, because the left identified with the mass class struggle and the centre (allegedly) did not.

In the chapters of the book which discuss the debate in the Second International, I "gave faces to" the right by the name of Bernstein, the left by the name of Luxemburg, and the centre by the name of Kautsky. I was explicit,

however, that all three identifications were imperfect. On the right Bernstein was nearer to Marxism than Keir Hardie or Jaurès was (p36), and Luxemburg was closer to the centre than were the real ideological leaders of the syndicalist and semi-syndicalist left like Sorel, Arturo Labriola, Gorter, Pannekoek, or Bogdanov and Lunacharsky (p37). “Down to 1914,” I wrote, “Russian Bolshevism was a tendency *within* the centre, not a tendency opposed to it.” (p54)

This last point is absolutely fundamental. I could, if I chose, have written the arguments against the coalitionist strategy of the right and the general strike strategy of the left entirely through quotations from *Lenin's* polemics against these tendencies. But to do so would be a subtle form of historical falsification. The connection of Lenin's line before 1914 with the strategic line of the Second International centre tendency has been amply demonstrated – most recently in Lars Lih's *Lenin Rediscovered*.

Why is this fundamental?

The immediate goal of communists has to be the political power of the working class. This is only possible if the existing state power is zerschlagen, smashed up: i.e. the soldiers, etc, cease to obey their commanders (or are defeated) and a new armed force is created controlled by the working class.

The process by which this happens involves revolutionary crisis. Crisis can break out through military defeat, and/or through mass strikes and demonstrations, and/or through the victory of a “left” party or coalition in elections and attempts to overthrow it by a coup (as happened in Spain and has occurred on several occasions in Latin America).

But crisis of the state does not spontaneously lead to victory. The (temporary) victory of the Russian revolution was due to the *presence* of a faction-party which expressed the workers' aspiration to take political power and reconstruct the society: the Bolsheviks. The defeat of the German and Austrian revolutions in 1918-19 (and the eventual victory of Nazism in those countries) was due to the *absence* of such a party.

On this point I am in entire agreement with the post-1917 Bolsheviks and with Trotsky among them. Moreover, Trotsky was in my view right in *Lessons of October* and in his various polemics with the Spanish left in the 1930s to insist that fetishism of soviets could not substitute for a party.

Further, it is clear that by February 1917 the Bolsheviks were already a faction-party with wide and deep mass roots. They were not a grouplet which suddenly “got big” under conditions of revolutionary crisis, but a faction-party which in 1912-14 was already winning the majority of workers' votes in both Duma and trade union elections, but which had been temporarily knocked back by repression in 1914-16.

Repeated revolutionary crises since 1918 have only confirmed and reconfirmed the point. If the working class is to take political power, it must have a party with real mass roots, which is determined to fight for political power,

before the crisis breaks out. Sects – even sects which grow very large, like the Fedayeen in 1979-80 Iran – are no substitute.

But this means the construction of a mass party has to take place under conditions in which the question of power is *not immediately posed*. Moreover, it means that *organising* work and *propaganda* work, whose payoff is not immediate, is as important as immediate *agitation* round strikes and other forms of the immediate class

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struggle. Further, the party has to carry on propaganda and agitation *on political questions* – on questions of the constitution and the structure of political power. This de-legitimises the existing state order, legitimises the mass class struggle and worker solidarity, and prepares the political ground for workers to aim for power when crisis breaks out.

This fact is *why* the centre built mass parties one of which – the Bolsheviks – could reach for power, while the Second International left did not. The lefts thought that the mass struggle would solve the problem of the bureaucracy: Luxemburg is explicit on the point and so is Trotsky, while the *real* all-the-way mass strike advocates like Sorel or Bogdanov's Vpered-ists argued against any political action under capitalism as corrupting.

The result is unorganised ideological polemic against the right, like the left in the SPD; or sects, like the SDKPiL of Luxemburg, Jogiches and Dzerzhinsky, or the DeLeonists; or ephemeral unorganised mass-action lefts, like the Italian Maximalists. These three forms have been repeated – too often! – by the post-1945 far left.

The ideas of the pre-1914 centre, including Kautsky, are therefore the necessary *starting point*. Put another way, Bolshevism, not Vpered-ism, is the necessary starting point. It is necessary to criticise the ideas of the centre, and I do so: they were radically wrong on the state, on nation versus internationalism, and – except for the Bolsheviks – wrong on “unity of the workers' movement”, i.e. unity with the right under any conditions, and for these reasons the majority of their leaders became scabs.

But the ideas of the Second International left and the fetishism of “struggle” as opposed to political action are no alternative. The far left has been trying them repeatedly and uselessly for the last 50-odd years.

Comrade Esterson insists we should keep banging our heads against this wall. To do is to commit yourself in advance to the defeat of the working class when revolutionary crisis *does* break out.