



Is the SACP travelling in the right direction?

A response to Kitson and Habib

The SACP's JEREMY CRONIN criticises 'dogmatic fundamentalism', and argues that the party's ditching of the concept of 'proletarian dictatorship' is not a rightward lurch into electoralist 'Eurocommunism', but a leftward move away from statist conceptions of workers' power, towards a perspective which seeks to empower the working class in all spheres of civil society

For the past three years, at least, the SACP has been grappling with the crisis and subsequent collapse of socialism in most of eastern Europe. What has gone wrong? What are the implications for us, a party with long historical ties to the Soviet Union? And what are the lessons for the struggle for socialism in our country?

This effort at theoretical assessment and self-criticism has provoked several critiques in the past weeks. They include 'Is the SACP really communist?' by Dave Kitson (*WIP* 73) and 'The SACP's restructuring of Communist theory; a shift to the right', by Adam Habib (*Transformation* 14, 1991)

I believe it is useful to look critically at both articles. Kitson's article provides us

with an excellent example of exactly how we should not face up to the present situation. Habib presents an altogether more coherent argument. In confronting his article one is challenged, I think usefully, to spell out more substantially the reason for the SACP's dropping of the concept of 'the dictatorship of the proletariat'.

Dogmatism

'Is the SACP really communist?', asks Dave Kitson, a former party member and political prisoner. Kitson begins by outlining a set of five basic marxist-leninist principles: 'that society ultimately has an economic basis. The history of society is the history of class struggles. The Communist Party should lead and serve the

working class in the capitalist epoch. The aim is socialism. Socialism is a period of transition between capitalism and communism.' (p27).

I have no basic problems whatsoever with this fundamental summary of core marxist principles. Unfortunately Kitson proves incapable of sustaining a coherent argument. Having outlined these principles, one expects him to assess whether the SACP stands by these, both in theory and practice, **in the concrete conditions of South Africa of the 1990s.**

Instead he hares off after a pet personal fixation, Joe Slovo. Kitson skim reads one pamphlet (Slovo's *Has Socialism Failed*), which expressly calls itself a **discussion paper** and which expressly underlines that it is not official SACP policy. And on the basis of a totally distorted reading of this one pamphlet Kitson comes to the 'scientific' conclusion that the SACP is no longer communist!

Nowhere does Kitson consider the actual practice and specific programme of action of the SACP and its allies in the present conjuncture here in South Africa. Nor does Kitson ever attempt even a basic analysis of this concrete South African situation. He simply considers one text and measures it up against another 'Text', 'The Classics', which he assumes to be some monolithic, more or less fixed entity.

For him marxism-leninism has merely to be **applied** more or less mechanically. And applications will either be orthodox or deviant. This conception of marxism is dogmatic, metaphysical, unscientific and, finally, anti-marxist. Kitson is thoroughly abstract. But the truth, Lenin (following Plekhanov following Hegel) was fond of saying, 'is always concrete'.

Kitson's quibbles

But what is it that Kitson finds un-communist about Joe Slovo's pamphlet? Kitson has six quibbles:

- Quibble 1: Slovo quotes Rosa Luxemburg;
- Quibble 2: The SACP's 1989 programme is entitled *The Path to Power*, and therefore omits the word 'freedom' from its title;
- Quibble 3: Slovo 'complains' that there is not enough in the classical marxist texts about the socialist transition period. (In fact, Slovo does not 'complain', he simply notes this as a fact and as one underlying reason why the classics cannot be elevated into a blue-print, as stalinism and other brands of dogmatism have on occasions attempted);

• Quibble 4: Slovo attacks the concept of 'the dictatorship of the proletariat' - I will come to this later;

• Quibble 5: Slovo says that Lenin believed capitalism was about to collapse in the immediate post-October 1917 period. (The quotations from Lenin that Kitson produces to the contrary are dated 1915, 1921 and 1922. They do not come from the crucial 1917-19 period.);

• Quibble 6: Slovo says Lenin did not address '...in any detail the nature of established socialist civil society'. (Correct. All Kitson can offer to the contrary is a brief quotation from *State and Revolution*, and what he imagines to be the oh-so-daring call to arm the workers. I will also come back to some of this in a moment.)

It is easy enough to reply in detail to each of these points, but I don't think it would serve much purpose. If we are to extract anything useful from Kitson's article, then I suggest we should use it as an example of how not to argue as a marxist. Let us look at his quibble number one (the sin of quoting Rosa Luxemburg).

Kitson actually spends more time arguing what a heresy it is to quote Luxemburg, than he does in examining the particular quotation in its own right, and in examining the context in which it is used in Slovo's *Has Socialism Failed?*.

This is dogmatism carried to its silliest limits. If one wanted to reply in kind, one could remark that, no sooner has Kitson attacked Slovo for quoting the **revolutionary martyr** Luxemburg, than he, Kitson, is quoting the right-wing historian, Lord Acton! That's okay, presumably because you won't find any negative references to Acton in Lenin's *Collected Works*! But all of this hardly lifts the argument out of the play-pen into which Kitson has taken it.

Luxemburg's concept of freedom

Let us look at the Luxemburg quotation as it stands in *Has Socialism Failed?* :

'Freedom only for the supporters of the government, only for the members of one party - however numerous they may be - is not freedom at all. Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently ... its effectiveness vanishes when "freedom" becomes a special privilege.'

Against this Kitson argues that 'it lacks a class attitude, implying that freedom to differ should be applied to everybody, including those who think differently because of their class'.

Maybe, but this is very far from prov-

ing that Slovo, let alone the SACP, have abandoned their class approach. In the first place, Kitson has not bothered to read what Slovo says immediately after quoting Luxemburg:

'These words may not have been appropriate as policy (which is what Luxemburg argued for) in the special conditions of the phase immediately after the seizure of state power in October 1917. **Without a limitation on democracy there was no way the revolution could have defended itself in the civil war and the direct intervention by the whole of the capitalist world.**' (*Has Socialism Failed?* p14 - JS's emphasis).

In other words, Slovo absolutely anchors the quotation in the context of class struggle. Slovo adds: 'But Luxemburg's concept of freedom is surely incontrovertible once a society [obviously a socialist society - JC] has achieved stability.'

Well, here I too would quibble with Slovo. I am not sure that Luxemburg's polemical remarks can remotely be described as a full blown and adequate concept of freedom. Luxemburg here seems to assume rather too much the valid but extremely limited, liberal idea of freedom as absence of restraint. I would prefer to see freedom understood much more as **empowerment** of the people. This is a point made in the SACP's programme, and it is a point that Slovo himself has made often enough.

Marxism is not monolithic

But I am wandering from my prime purpose, which is to illustrate what scientific socialism is **not**. Kitson is so excited to have discovered an 'heretical' quote, evidence of an anti-body (Luxemburg), in Slovo's pamphlet that he is quite incapable of understanding the point Slovo is making. This is dogmatism at its purest.

Marxism, like any science, is not a monolithic and closed dogma simply awaiting application. It is a body of theory, yes, but one which needs constantly to be tried out in practice, developed and revised. Of course, there are boundaries beyond which it would be meaningless to continue calling revisions and developments marxist or leninist. These broad boundaries are roughly the boundaries of the five basic principles outlined (but quickly forgotten) by Kitson himself.

Nor is marxism-leninism reducible to personalities. Propositions are not automatically true because Lenin (or false because Luxemburg) uttered them. Marxism-leninism is a body of scientific the-

ory. It is no more the sum of everything ever written by two or three historical individuals (Marx, Engels, Lenin), than the science of physics is everything ever written (and on any topic whatsoever) by Newton and Einstein.

This is not to say that Marx, Engels and Lenin did not make the most outstanding contribution to our understanding of history and class struggle. But not everything they said was complete, true, or necessarily in conformity with other things they said and wrote at other times.

Habib

Unfortunately, I do not have the space to deal in detail with many of the misunderstandings and false attributions made by Habib (a member of the Workers' Organisation for Socialist Action (Wosa)).

The essence of Habib's intervention is that, while the SACP has moved in the direction of greater democracy, tolerance of other left opinions and openness (all of which he welcomes), it has not decisively broken **strategically** with stalinism. Habib identifies our whole strategic approach (the national democratic revolution as the most direct road towards socialism in South Africa), as deeply stalinist in character.

The communist call for national democratic alliances in a whole range of countries (he mentions China in the 1920s, Spain in the 1930s, Cuba in the 1950s, and Nicaragua in the 1970s) was, in his view, a strategic perspective serving the narrow national interests of the Soviet Union. It was a strategic perspective forced upon various communist parties, so as not to rock the international boat, thereby safeguarding the building of socialism in one country.

Because the SACP has failed to break strategically from its 'stalinism', argues Habib, our present theoretical and strategic revisions represent a move rightwards, both politically (into 'Eurocommunism' - 'pursuing the parliamentary path to socialism'), and economically (we are supposed to be applying Gorbachev's somewhat *ad hoc* perestroika policies to South Africa!).

In all of this Habib is profoundly wrong.

Flawed international perspective

In the first place his international perspective is deeply flawed. Communist commitment to national democratic revolutions in many countries did not result simply in a series of betrayals of the socialist revolution, or in missings of the boat. What about Vietnam, an example



Throughout the two-year guerilla struggle in Cuba, Fidel Castro argued that the revolution should be neither communist nor capitalist

he chooses to ignore?

Or what about the Cuban Fidelista revolution of 1959? It certainly does not confirm the point he wants it to make.

'In 1959, when Fidel Castro led the Cuban Revolution, the official Communist Party, under the strict instructions of Moscow, opposed him', Habib tells us (note 9, p80). The implication is that the Cuban communists were so committed to the national democratic stage of struggle that they missed the real socialist revolution.

It is true that, in the course of the two year guerrilla struggle led by Castro's 26 July Movement, the Communist Party (the Partido Socialista Popular, as it was then called) was at best equivocal. But this partial failure by the PSP was a failure to recognise the real national democratic revolution going on in front of its nose. The 26 July Movement was a patriotic front embracing a diversity of forces - both ideologically and in its social composition. At the time, its leader Fidel Castro argued that the revolution should be 'neither communist nor capitalist'. In 1958 he said:

'Let me say for the record that we have no plans for the expropriation or nationalisation of foreign investments... I per-

sonally have come to feel that nationalisation is, at best, a cumbersome instrument..wholesale nationalisation would obviously hamper the principal point of our economic platform - industrialisation at the fastest possible rate.' (R Scheer and MZeitlin, *Cuba, an American tragedy*, p63).

Castro's perspectives at the time were patriotic, anti-neocolonialist. And the Cuban communists tended to criticise Castro's guerrilla struggle from an abstract left position.

What practical tasks?

Shifting closer to home, and directly related to his dismissal of the national democratic struggle, the crucial weakness in Habib's position is that he is unable to offer us any practical revolutionary tasks in the present.

Habib certainly recognises the long haul character of building socialism once there is a working class state. Socialism is 'a process characterised by revolutionary reforms that gradually lead to social control over the economy' (p75). That is, building socialism is a process, it has steps and stages.

But between now and the workers' state Habib is incapable of envisaging a concrete process, that is other steps, or stages, or phases. This means that he is unable to develop any substantial practical revolutionary strategy and tactics.

Instead, Habib relies on a big bang view of the socialist revolution: 'Workers will often act in unison with their class enemies against their long-term class interests. But this is not to suggest that the hegemony of the ruling class can never be threatened. At precise moments in history, **objective conditions** weaken the ideological, political and economic hegemony of the ruling class **and compel** the proletariat to engage in the struggle for state power. But these moments, known as "revolutionary crises", never last long.' (p73) (my emphases).

I certainly agree that, partly as a result of objective conditions, there can be a revolutionary moment, a massive accumulation of contradictions that opens up possibilities for the revolutionary seizure of power.

But Habib gives us no sense of building towards these moments, or of deepening, in active struggle, the crisis of the bourgeoisie. Instead, his perspective can only result in passivity, relying on the spontaneism of 'the moment'. At best (though Habib does not spell this out) all we need is a small vanguard that keeps

itself pure and poised, unsullied with involvements in present phases of struggle, or with popular fronts or alliances. There is no need to worry about present smallness or ineffectivity, after all history will eventually 'compel' the working class to wage our kind of struggle.

The crucial missing link is Habib's inability to grasp the perspectives of popular power.

The parliamentary road - or people's power?

It is true that the SACP has in recent years committed itself in principle to a multi-party democracy. And it is also true that if there are elections for a democratic Constituent Assembly or a new non-racial National Assembly in the coming years, the party will almost certainly contest these elections - either independently or in some kind of electoral pact with our allies.

But is this the same as pursuing a 'parliamentary path' to socialism? Habib (quoting Mandel) accurately portrays some (and I could add quite a few more) flaws in a narrow parliamentary approach in a capitalist society (p73): the state with its repressive and bureaucratic apparatuses is never neutral, the entire economic climate is permeated by capitalism, the bourgeoisie owns and controls the commanding heights of the media, etc. These objections to a strategy narrowly focussed on winning socialism through parliamentary elections come neither as news, nor as something with which I disagree.

These are arguments against a single-track, narrow electoral approach. A socialist parliament all on its own, surrounded by a capitalist economy, reactionary armed forces and the old bureaucracy, and by a host of anti-worker ideological institutions, is a parliament that is not going to last long.

It is precisely for this reason that long before workers' state power (whether the breakthrough is made in elections or in insurrection) wider struggles for popular hegemony and empowerment are absolutely essential. These struggles need to be waged in all the trenches of civil society - schools, townships, the work-place, on the land, and in the media. These are struggles that need to build the organs of popular power - self-defence units, township committees, work-place structures, village committees, etc.

It is true that working class state power will, in principle, create the conditions under which these popular organs and struggles will be able to flourish. But the



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converse is also absolutely true.

This approach, and it is a practical approach that speaks directly into the struggles on the ground in our country, is foreign to Habib. In fact, he completely misunderstands an SACP spokesperson interviewed in *WIP* 60 who says the 'parliamentary road can never be separated from extra-parliamentary struggle'. Habib doesn't even notice the reference to extra-parliamentary struggle, and takes this as evidence that the SACP is pursuing the 'parliamentary road'.

But popular mass struggles, popular power, popular hegemony (that is, intense mass struggle) can create the conditions in which parliamentary elections (or, for that matter, an insurrection) can become a real turning point, and in which parliamentary (or insurrectionary) gains can actually be defended.

Habib cites the Chilean experience in the 1970s several times as proof of the impossibility of the 'parliamentary road'. Chile is no more an argument against socialists contesting elections, than the crushing of the Paris Commune of 1879 is a proof of the futility of insurrection.

The dictatorship of the proletariat
For Kitson the move away from the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat

in Slovo's pamphlet and in the SACP's 1989 programme is purely cosmetic and opportunistic: 'It (the concept) is not mentioned in the new party programme, *The Path to Power*, although the need for workers' power to establish socialism is. This is like wearing a transparent figleaf.'

But it is precisely because workers' power and the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' are NOT synonymous that the SACP at its 7th Congress in 1989 dropped the concept from its programme.

Nor is Habib's explanation of the SACP's shift on this matter valid. It is not a shift rightwards into a narrow parliamentary road. In fact, the SACP's dropping of the concept 'dictatorship of the proletariat' is a shift leftwards. It is a shift away from a narrow, statist and bureaucratic conception of working class power. It is precisely this narrow statism which, it seems to me, is at the core of the stalinist deviation.

It is crucial that we understand this, not for narrow polemical purposes, not so that we can turn the tables on Habib and accuse him of failing to wean himself adequately of stalinism. We need to break away from a narrow statism in order to address one of the most crucial challenges of the present.

As we build a mass-based ANC and a relatively large SACP, are we trying to build electoral machines which treat their members as voting fodder?

Are we trying to do no more than prepare ourselves for bureaucratic power, getting our policy blue-prints and pin-stripe suits all ready? And what do we mean by trade union independence? Do we mean that organised workers should stay aloof from the wider struggles for political power, leaving these to the middle strata, to the next generation of anti-worker bureaucrats?

Or are we, rather, not trying to build mass formations, capable of mobilising millions of people in active struggle to defeat the present regime? Are we also not trying to build for the future, mass formations that are able to deepen and defend the longer-term process of national democratic transformation? And should they deepen and defend this process, not just from positions within the state, but from all the trenches of civil society? And, finally, is this not the most direct road to a democratic socialist South Africa?

Neither dogmatic fundamentalism, nor a passive waiting for the 'revolutionary moment' help us to answer these, the real questions of the day. •