

# PCF and the Dictatorship of the proletariat

(A. Buick, 1976)

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[As expected, the French Communist Party voted at its XXII<sup>e</sup> Congress in Paris in May to remove the reference of the « dictatorship of the proletariat » from its rule-book. This was a foregone conclusion, since the Party leader, Georges Marchais had announced two years ago that this would be happening. The only opposition came from a small group around the overrated philosopher Louis Althusser and from die-hard Stalinists like Jeannette Vermeesch, widow of former Party leader, Maurice Thorez.]

The dictatorship of the proletariat », what is this obscure phrase attributed to Marx which was discussed so widely in the press and on the television at the time of the 22nd Congress of the Parti Communiste Français in February and which the PCF plans to remove from its statut ?

« Dictatorship of the proletariat » was indeed a phrase used by Marx, but never with the meaning the PCF has given it. Marx always insisted that socialism could only be established by political action; in other words, that in order to establish Socialism, the working class should gain control of the machinery of government and use it to force the capitalist class to give up its ownership of the means of production. In his private letters and notes Marx sometimes referred to this use of political power by the working class to abolish capitalism as the « dictatorship of the proletariat ».

Both words are obscure and derive from Ancient Rome. Under the Constitution of the Roman Republic there was provision for one of the magistrates in times of crisis to be nominated *dictator*, which meant that he was invested with plenary powers to deal with the situation. *Proletarii* was the word used to describe the poor Roman citizens who were regarded as contributing nothing to the State but children (in Latin *proles* means 'offspring')

## Political terminology

These two words were introduced into modern political terminology at the time of the French Revolution, the leaders and thinkers of which modelled themselves on the Ancient Roman Republic. The Jacobins were in favour of a 'dictatorship' by a minority of revolutionaries to crush the resistance of the nobility. The term *prolétaire* came into use to describe ordinary, poor people.

Both terms were inherited by the political descendants of the extreme French revolutionaries in the 19th century,, including the Utopian communists from whom Marx learned part of his socialism.

Marx, however, used the word *proletariat* in a more precise fashion, not to mean just poor people generally but only those who worked for wages: the working class. The ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ was thus, for him, the exercise of political power by the working class in their own interest. This Marx equated with a complete political democracy in which the working class – the majority in capitalist society – would rule. His references to the « dictatorship of the proletariat » all show that he understood it to be the exercise of political power by the working class within a democratic framework.

We, in the Socialist Party of Canada and the Companion Parties, have never used the phrase « dictatorship of the proletariat » in our everyday propaganda. This is not because we do not agree with Marx that the working class should take democratic political action to establish Socialism, but because the phrase is obscure and misleading. We have always preferred to express the same concept by the use of phrases like « the capture of political power » and « the conquest of the powers of government » which are more easily understandable.

In speaking of the « dictatorship of the proletariat » rather than simply of a « revolutionary dictatorship », Marx made a decisive break with the Jacobin tradition. The idea of « dictatorship » was given a democratic content, since the plenary political power it implied was to be exercised by the majority class in society and not by some revolutionary minority.

By the turns of the nineteenth century Jacobin ideas has almost died out in France but were enjoying a revival in Russia, a country whose political and social system had many of the features of France’s *ancien regime*. Here the idea of a minority revolutionary dictatorship had an attraction for the anti-Tsarist revolutionaries, including some of those who considered themselves Marxists. Among the latter was Lenin who carried this idea over into the Social Democratic movement.

### **Working class democracy**

Lenin was in favour of the Russian Social Democrats being organised as a »vanguard party « whose task would be to lead the workers, peasants and oppressed nationalities of Russia against the Tsarist regime. The Bolshevik revolution of 1917 was carried out in just this way — and it resulted in the establishment not of Marx’s ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, ie, a working class democracy, but in the revolutionary dictatorship of the minority Bolshevik Party. Since the economic and political conditions of Russia did not permit the establishment of socialism, the Bolsheviks had no choice but to develop capitalism in *Russia* (largely in the form of « state capitalism », as Lenin himself described it). But since capitalism cannot be run in the interests of the working class, the Bolshevik dictatorship soon became a dictatorship not just against the nobility, the capitalists and richer peasants but also a dictatorship over the working class: the trade unions were taken over by the government, strikes were banned, protests were suppressed and protestors sent to labour camps.

Unfortunately this was not evident to a section of the war- weary and discontented working class of Western Europe. To them Russia was what it proclaimed itself to be: a « workers republic » which showed the way for the workers of other countries. The Bolshevik government exploited this sympathy to split the Social Democratic parties in the West and set up ‘Communist’ parties based on Bolshevik ideology.

In France in 1920 a majority of the delegates to the Social Democrats' Congress at Tours voted to go over to Bolshevism and set up the Parti Communiste Français. The new PCF was committed to Bolshevik ideology, including the idea that it – as the alleged « vanguard of the working class » – would exercise a revolutionary dictatorship. By a strange irony of history, the Jacobin idea of minority dictatorship, which had been rejected by Marx and which had almost died out in France, was reintroduced there by way of backward Russia. This time, however, it was called the « dictatorship of the proletariat ». It was with this Jacobin, Leninist sense that the phrase was introduced into the [statut \[rule-book\]](#) of the PCF.

Now it has been removed. Which is not such a bad thing, since, first, it had no right to be there in the first place, and second, its being there added to the already great enough confusion surrounding the phrase. [\*]

The PCF has changed since 1920 in that it now no longer believes in armed insurrection as the way to power (which never was practical proposition anyway) and has instead returned to the gradualist reformism of Social Democracy. This change dates from the middle of the 1930's when on orders from Moscow (following the signing of the 1935 Franco-Soviet Defence Pact), the PCF decided to beat the patriotic drum. The enemy was no longer seen as the capitalist class as such but as a small minority of anti-patriotic, pro-fascist politicians and capitalist against whom the people of France should unite. The present strategy of the PCF is a variation on this theme, with the « big monopolies » as the enemy to be isolated.

According to current PCF ideology, the present stage of capitalism is « capitalisme monopoliste d'Etat » where political and economic power is in the hands of a tiny minority of big monopolists. The strategy of the PCF is to try to overcome these monopolists by organising « les couches non-monopolistes » (workers, peasants [...] etc) into a « Union du peuple de France ». As Secretary-General Georges Marchais expressed it at the 22nd Congress in February: « Nous voulons rassembler toutes les forces vives de la nation contre les barons du grand capital, nous voulons l'Union du peuple de France ».

The purpose of this patriotic Union is, first, to limit and, then, to break the power of the monopolies so opening the way to what Marchais in his closing words to the Congress called – in an obscenity against all the internationalist principles – of Marxian socialism — « socialisme aux couleurs de la France ».

It is not difficult to see why a commitment, if only on paper, to the *dictatorship of the Communist Party* is an embarrassment. The « classes non-monopolistes » and « les forces vives de la nation » could never be persuaded to vote for such a programme; the desired anti-monopolist electoral majority would never be achieved and the PCF would be doomed to remain a permanent opposition party. Let there be no mistake about it: the present tactics of the PCF are dictated by pure electoral opportunism. It is not the general policy of seeking to win control of political power by democratic means — the ballot box — that we criticise. This is the only practical way of establishing socialism in today's social and political conditions, and has always been our policy (even at the time the PCF was advocating armed insurrection). What we criticise is the reformism and electoral For, in order to establish socialism, it is not sufficient that a party calling itself socialist wins an electoral majority; what is important is that this electoral majority should be a majority for Socialism, won on the socialist programme of establishing the common ownership and democratic control of the

means of production. The PCF has adopted the old, failed Social-Democratic policy of trying to win an electoral majority on appeals to nationalism and promises of reform of capitalism.

This strategy may well be successful in the sense of achieving PCF Ministers in a future government, but it won't be successful in the sense of improving the lot of the working class. For the PCF would be participating in the government of capitalism. Elected on a non-socialist, patriotic and reformist programme, a left-wing government in France would have no alternative but to continue with capitalism. Certainly, a few more elements of state capitalism (nationalisations) could be introduced, but it makes little difference to the working class whether their employer is a big monopoly or an even bigger monopoly (the State).

Capitalism can never be run in the interest of the working class for the simple reason that it is based on their exploitation. Under capitalism working-class consumption has to be limited to provide capital for profitable investment. This is the case in state capitalist Russia just as much as in any openly capitalist country, and it would be the case in France under a leftwing government with PCF participation. As a result, sooner or later such a government would come into conflict with the working class: wage demands would have to be resisted; strike actions condemned, appeals for austerity made (the PCF, of course, has already had experience of doing this from the period 1945-47 when it participated in the government of post-war French capitalism). The PCF's patriotic rhetoric could well be useful here: as well as the big monopolists, striking workers could be – and no doubt would be – denounced as « unpatriotic » and « anti-national ».

The PCF is not and never has been a socialist party. It was founded as a Bolshevik vanguard party and has become a Social Democratic reformist party, but its aim has remained unchanged; national state capitalism not world socialism.

Adam Buick. (Luxembourg, mai 1976).

Note:

variants of the text: [only in *Standard*] or [only in the *Cahiers de l'ISEA*] before [\*].

[\*] : end of the *Standard* letter.