

Louis Project debates Mick Armstrong on revolutionary organisation

On Mick Armstrong's *From little things big things grow*

Louis Project

One of the more rapidly growing groups on the left is Socialist Alternative. Unfortunately it would appear from a book by Mick Armstrong that they remain wedded to party-building conceptions that will inhibit future growth. It is understandable why such self-styled Leninist formations would cling to counter-productive methodologies since the dead hand of tradition weighs heavily on any group seeking to establish itself as the avatar of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky. Perhaps a better approach would be to start with a fresh sheet of paper, an approach virtually ruled out for small propaganda groups obsessed with 'revolutionary continuity.'

Mick Armstrong's party-building ideas are contained in *From little things big things grow: strategies for building revolutionary socialist organizations*.¹ Apparently, the title of Armstrong's book was inspired by a left wing song by Paul Kelly that deals with Aboriginal and labour struggles in Australia. Perhaps I am reading too much into the title, but I am afraid that it reminds me of the 'nucleus' analogy from chemistry or physics that is used so often in would-be Leninist circles. Basically, a mass revolutionary party starts with a nucleus of Marxists steeled with a correct program, which more often than not revolves around a correct interpretation of the 'Russian questions'. If you don't have the correct position on 1917 or some other ostensible benchmark date, you will not progress toward the final goal of seizing power. Thus, a 'program' and the initial cadre assembled around that program are like the nucleus of an element like carbon or uranium. What is misunderstood unfortunately by those who think in these terms is that a chemical nucleus rests on materialist foundations while a 'program' is simply a set of ideas.

1 Mick Armstrong *From little things big things grow: strategies for building revolutionary socialist organizations* Socialist Alternative, Melbourne 2008, also www.sa.org.au/index.php?option=com_content&task=category§ionid=16&id=171&Itemid=124, accessed 14 January 2009.

Armstrong lays out a schema that distinguishes between 3 types of socialist groups after the fashion of a political scientist or a sociologist:

In the Marxist tradition there are three main types of organisation: discussion circles, propaganda groups and parties. These categories are not arbitrary, but are used to describe qualitatively different types of organisation. Discussion circles are tiny groups attempting to establish a Marxist tradition. Their main orientation is theoretical clarification. Political activity such as selling a magazine or intervening in strikes is a low priority. Propaganda groups are involved in a broader range of activity, but because they are small and lack influence in the working class, they recruit on the basis of ideas. Socialists make a distinction between two kinds of propaganda: general (sometimes called abstract) and concrete.

Looming over the discussion circle and the propaganda group is the mass party, which is the final destination of any self-avowed revolutionary organization just as the World Cup is in soccer. To get to that goal, you have to play your cards right:

By recruiting people to a propaganda group today, Socialist Alternative is laying the basis for a mass revolutionary party that can lead future workers' struggles. But recruitment by itself is useless if the people recruited aren't educated in Marxism, if they aren't trained in revolutionary activity, and if they aren't politically integrated into the organisation. What's more, to build from a small revolutionary group into a mass party is no simple linear process, whereby the group grows by 20 per cent each year until it has tens of thousands of members.

For Armstrong, the key to success is building 'cadre', a term that comes out of the military. The cadre is like professional officers who can be called upon to provide leadership to the masses when a pre-Revolutionary situation emerges. Here's Armstrong describing the cadre-building process:

This cadre, this 'solid core', is just as important in times of retreat, when workers suffer setbacks. In order to hold a revolutionary organisation together in times of defeat theory is even more paramount. When the going is tough a much higher level of theoretical agreement is necessary to hold a propaganda group together because a small group without roots in the working class is inherently more unstable than a mass party. You can't survive on the basis of a few slogans, you need a more sophisticated analysis. The cadre has to be steeled.

You will note the need for 'sophisticated analysis'. This is in keeping with the generally ideological dynamic of the party-building conceptions found in Armstrong's article. The presumption is that a kind of soldier/priesthood that has been properly inculcated into the doctrines of the group is necessary to withstand bourgeois pressures that might open the 'program' up to alien influences.

As it turns out, Marx and Engels had the proper amount of iron nuclei to assure their steely composition. Never for a minute did they lose track of the goal to move from a propaganda group to the next step up on the ladder—a mass party.

There followed a prolonged lull in the class struggle from 1851-1864. The Communist League was wound up following a split, and Marx and Engels concentrated on research. This is the period that is used as evidence of Marx's abandonment of active party politics. But it is not true. The prime focus of Marx's 'swotting', as he termed it, was to strengthen the Communist forces—'the Marx party'. Throughout this period Marx and Engels maintained a nucleus of experienced comrades so they would be able to take advantage of any revival of the movement. This is why 'the Marx party' was able to quickly win the leadership of the next phase of struggle. They had clarified a program around which they cohered a group of supporters.

I am afraid that Mick Armstrong is guilty of projecting backwards into the political careers of Marx and Engels his own experiences, an error common among the 'Leninist' left today. It turns them into 'party builders' of the sort that proliferate the extreme left everywhere. Whatever else one might say about Marx and Engels, there is little evidence that they were interested in the kind of ideological litmus tests that we find today. The very fact that they were open to being in the same party as anarchists (just as Lenin was open to the same kind of relationship with the Industrial Workers of the World) should tell you that they had a completely different conception of what it meant to build a party. Perhaps it might be useful to remind ourselves what they said in the *Communist Manifesto*:

The Communists do not form a separate party opposed to the other working-class parties.

They have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole.

They do not set up any sectarian principles of their own, by which to shape and mould the proletarian movement.

The final chapter of Armstrong's book is the most interesting since it engages with some of the more recent efforts to break from the sectarian party-building model that he is so desperate to retain. Right off the bat he writes:

The argument that small groups of socialists need to start by first building a socialist propaganda group if they are to have any hope of laying secure foundations for a mass revolutionary party is by no means widely accepted by socialists today. Socialist Alternative's approach is condemned as narrow, rigid and sectarian or is dismissed as at best utopian.

Taking aim at Murray Smith, the European Trotskyist who has been fighting mechanical understandings of 'democratic centralism', Armstrong warns that broad left initiatives like

the Scottish Socialist Party that lack the proper iron nucleus to support adequate steeliness will cause millions to die in a new world war:

The idea of building ‘broad’ socialist parties which combine revolutionaries and reformists is simply a reversion to the approach of the Second Socialist International. It ended in disaster. Under the test of war the reformists abandoned any commitment to the defence of the most basic democratic rights and sent workers off to die in their millions in the trenches of World War I. When the revolutionaries objected, their reformist ‘comrades’ combined with the extreme right to arrest or murder them.

Betraying his ideological orientation to politics and party-building, Armstrong’s warning once again misses the materialist roots of why Socialist parliamentarians voted for war. It was not because revolutionary ideas were tainted by reformism. It was because the top layers of the Second International had become embourgeoisified during the long imperialist expansion prior to WWI. Trade union leaders and parliamentarians had begun to think like the ruling class through a process of social and economic cooptation. This of course has nothing to do with the efforts of some socialists today to try to create an organizational framework that is far more flexible than the one that supposedly has the proper Leninist pedigree.

Armstrong next takes aim at Hal Draper’s ‘Toward a new beginning—on another road the alternative to the micro-sect’,² an essay written in 1971 that made the same kind of attempt made by Murray Smith and others to break with sectarian party-building ideas. Along with Bert Cochran, another veteran of the Trotskyist movement who developed similar anti-sectarian ideas in the early 1950s that eventually expressed themselves through the magazine *American Socialist*,³ Draper rejected commonly understood notions about how to build a Leninist party. Armstrong does cite Draper but not his most trenchant observation that seems to address Mick Armstrong’s notions about properly steeled cadre head-on, especially in military terms:

The sect establishes itself on a HIGH level (far above that of the working class) and on a thin base which is ideologically selective (usually necessarily outside working class). Its working-class character is claimed on the basis of its aspiration and orientation, not its composition or its life. It then sets out to haul the working class up to its level, or calls on the working class to climb up the grade. From behind its organizational walls, it sends out scouting parties to contact the working class, and missionaries to convert two here and three there. It sees itself becoming,

2 Hal Draper ‘Toward a new beginning—on another road the alternative to the micro-sect’ 1971, www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1971/alt/index.htm, accessed 27 December 2008.

3 See Bert Cochran selected articles from *American socialist* 1954-1959, www.marx.org/history/etol/newspape/amersocialist/american_socialist.htm, accessed 28 December 2008.

one day, a mass revolutionary party by a process of accretion; or by eventual unity with two or three other sects; or perhaps by some process of entry.

Fortunately for the left, the tide is turning against the kinds of misunderstandings incorporated in Mick Armstrong's article. Partly, this is the result of scholarship about Lenin's party that reveals how little it was a departure from party-building conceptions found everywhere in the Second International, a point made convincingly by Lars Lih in his recent *Lenin rediscovered*.⁴

I agree completely with Lih, drawing my own conclusions long ago from a re-reading of Lenin under the advice of Peter Camejo in the early 1980s. After Camejo had witnessed the implosion of the Socialist Workers Party, he decided to read Lenin without the kinds of preconceptions he had inherited from decades in the party. Like Bert Cochran, Hal Draper and Murray Smith, Camejo became convinced that a more open political culture was required.

My own research into the matter has convinced me that groups such as Socialist Alternative are basing themselves much more on Zinoviev's party-building ideas than Lenin's. In 1923 Grigory Zinoviev wrote *History of the Bolshevik Party*,⁵ a work that despite its obscurity today helped to shape the thinking of the first generation of Marxist-Leninists. Despite their disagreement over the 'Russian questions', Stalin and Trotsky shared ideas about 'democratic centralism' that could be found in Zinoviev's history. Without going into too much detail, Zinoviev hoped to create a cookie cutter version of Lenin's party that could be applied everywhere.

If it was simply a matter of people reading and becoming inspired by his book, there probably would have been less damage done. Instead, using the power and authority of the Third International, Zinoviev imposed his views during the 'Bolshevisation' congress of the Comintern of 1924. After the disaster in Germany, Communists everywhere—particularly in Germany—were less willing to accept the mandates of the Kremlin. Instead of promoting a wide-ranging discussion of what had happened, Zinoviev and Stalin sought to tighten control. Sensing the danger that the Kremlin might eventually become something like the Vatican as was Zinoviev's clear aim, Lenin urged that the Comintern headquarters be moved from Soviet Russia in 1921.

After 1924, Communist Parties everywhere got into the habit of promoting strict rules about party membership under the guise of 'democratic centralism' that had little to do with the free-wheeling atmosphere of Lenin's Party. In the United States, the CP passed its own 'Bolshevisation' resolution that sought to tighten the party and make a scapegoat out of Ludwig Lore, a dissident who had become troubled by Zinoviev's ambitions. The resolution stated that '... the task of Bolshevisation presents itself concretely to our Party

4 Lars T. Lih *Lenin rediscovered: What is to be done? in context* Brill, Leiden 2006.

5 Grigorii Zinoviev *History of the Bolshevik Party: a popular outline* New Park, London 1973 (1925).

as the task of completely overwhelming the organizational and ideological remnants of our social-democratic inheritance, of eradicating Loreism, of making out of the Party a functioning organism of revolutionary proletarian leadership.’

It should be pointed out that Ludwig Lore was the main supporter of Leon Trotsky in the U.S., a year at least prior to James P. Cannon’s recruitment to Trotsky’s faction. Ironically, both Cannon and Vincent Ray Dunne, who would also become a Trotskyist, voted for Lore’s expulsion. In Cannon’s *First ten years of American Communism*,⁶ he describes Lore as someone who never ‘felt really at home in the Comintern’ and who never became an ‘all-out communist in the sense that the rest of us did.’ We should honour Lore’s memory for having been an early critic of mechanical Bolshevism.

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6 James P. Cannon *The first ten years of American communism: report of a participant* Pathfinder, New York 1973 (1962).

A response to Louis Project

Mick Armstrong

With the deepening economic crisis opening greater possibilities for the socialist movement internationally than we have seen for decades, rigorous analysis and debate about the way forward are essential. But that debate needs to go beyond timeless generalities to a concrete assessment of the various strategies socialists have experimented with over the last few decades, if it is to be of genuine value. Unfortunately, Louis Project has not met this challenge in his critique of my short book, *From little things big things grow: strategies for building revolutionary socialist organisations*.

Project opposes building clear cut revolutionary socialist organisations and is a supporter of the 'broad party' model for building the left today. But he offers no concrete argument, rooted in recent experience, for this approach. Instead he offers us platitudes about 'a more open political culture', the need to be 'flexible' and start 'with a fresh sheet of paper'. Project provides no balance sheet of the performance of broad left parties. The experience has hardly been an inspiring one. Communist Refoundation in Italy, long held up by broad party supporters as *the* model to aspire to, ended in a complete disaster. After a jag to the left around the time of the anti-globalisation protests in the early 2000s, the reformist leadership of Refoundation around Fausto Bertinotti moved to an accommodation with neo-liberal forces and joined the centre-left government. It proceeded to endorse attacks on workers' rights and the sending of Italian troops to Afghanistan and Lebanon. Understandably this led to working class disillusionment with Refoundation, disarray in its ranks and a collapse of the party's vote at the most recent elections. What is Project's balance sheet of this disastrous test of his favoured model? Not a word.

Other broad left party projects have hardly been more successful in advancing working class interests. In Brazil, the Workers Party has in government proved to be a loyal servant of the Brazilian bourgeoisie. The Scottish Socialist Party after toying with Scottish nationalism tore itself apart in an unseemly split. The Australian Socialist Alliance never seriously got off the ground and survives today as a pathetic rump propped up by the Democratic Socialist Perspective. The Socialist Alliance in Britain went nowhere, while the 'broad' Respect also in Britain spectacularly blew itself apart in a bitter dispute between the supporters of former Labour MP George Galloway and the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). But even at its height the 'broad' Respect had fewer members than the 'narrow' Marxist SWP. It is too early as yet to draw a definite balance sheet on the German Left Party. However, any idea that the Left Party, which started out being well to the right of Communist Refoundation, will simply transform the fortunes of socialists in Germany is dangerous wishful thinking.

None of this is to argue that given our current small forces revolutionary socialists should not participate in parties with a significant working class following that break to the left from mainstream social democracy. But that is not the same as championing 'broad

parties' as a *substitute* for a revolutionary party or to argue for revolutionaries to dissolve their organisations into these essentially reformist parties. Marxists should have worked inside Communist Refoundation to argue both for the defence of immediate working class interests and against the embrace of neo-liberal policies by its leadership and for an alternative vision for transforming society. But to have any hope of being effective in that task the revolutionaries needed not only to make arguments as individuals but to cohere around them all those who opposed the reformist orientation of the leadership. That in turn necessitated that the revolutionaries, no matter how few in number, had their own organisation.

The bulk of *From little things big things grow*, deals with the question of how the small groups of revolutionary socialists that exist today can expand their forces and contribute positively to the building of a mass revolutionary socialist party in the future. This is a pressing question as, for the last thirty years in the advanced capitalist countries, unfavourable objective conditions have meant that revolutionary socialists have been confined to the fringes of the working class movement.

My basic argument is that when small groups of revolutionaries are starting out, their first task is to clarify their own ideas and then go on to cohere supporters around them on the basis of those ideas – in other words to form propaganda circles or groups. In one version or another this is the way most successful revolutionary socialist organisations and parties have developed over the last 170 years. So there is nothing particularly pathbreaking about my approach. Yet this basic initial building work has often been done on an extremely pragmatic basis without too much theoretical reflection on how the organisation established its initial roots. My book, successfully or otherwise, is an attempt to theorise this early stage of development and generalise some basic lessons. I believe this task is even more pressing today than in the past.

One reason the lessons of how to begin to lay the basis for a mass party have not been discussed in any great depth is that, in marked contrast to the experience of the last 30 years, most successful propaganda groups had only a very brief existence. For example in China the initial Communist discussion circles formed in 1920 gave birth to a Communist Party of 53 members (i.e. a propaganda group) in July 1921. The party grew rapidly out of the revolutionary upheavals of the mid-1920s to well over 50,000 members. The most important exception to this pattern is Georgii Plekhanov's Emancipation of Labour Group, the first Russian Marxist organisation, which was founded in Geneva in 1883. Plekhanov's group initially had only three members. They had to withstand over a decade of extreme isolation before the political climate began to change inside Russia. Nonetheless Plekhanov and his co-thinkers with their polemics against the dominant populist tradition played a critical role in establishing the Marxist movement in Russia.

Precisely because the Emancipation of Labour Group had a longer continuous existence than most successful propaganda groups it in many ways served as an inspiration for *From little things big things grow*. In some ways, however, the basic orientation had been laid down by Marx and Engels in their activity in the Communist Correspondence Committees of the 1840s. This is spelt out in some detail in my book so Proyect is mistaken in arguing that my approach is based 'on Zinoviev's party-building ideas'. The Russian Bolshevik

Grigory Zinoviev was *born* in 1883 the year Plekhanov founded the Emancipation of Labour Group. So unless Zinoviev was extremely precocious it is doubtful that he had any great influence on the approach of Plekhanov's circle. Neither is it the case that Zinoviev wrote anything substantial on the Emancipation of Labour Group or on the Communist Correspondence Committees or indeed on any of the other major examples I use in my book. In fact Zinoviev had virtually nothing to say about propaganda groups.

This is not to deny the baleful influence Zinoviev had as head of the Comintern when he imposed 'Bolshevisation' on the Communist movement in the mid-1920s. His approach deprived the CPs of their more thoughtful and independent leaders and helped prepare the ground for the Stalinisation of the movement. It is undoubtedly also the case that the corruption of the Communist movement by Zinoviev and then by Stalin had a deleterious impact not just on the official CPs but also on their Trotskyist opponents. But Proyect misses the mark when he goes on to argue that Socialist Alternative adheres to some Zinovievist version of 'democratic centralism'. We have made our view on this question clear in a number of places.⁷ Unlike many on the Trotskyist left we believe that revolutionary organisations of just a few hundred members should not attempt to operate as miniature versions of the Bolshevik party. Grandiose talk about 'democratic centralism' is both overblown and destructive.

There is a final point worth making about Zinoviev. Proyect tries to paint all revolutionary opponents of his 'broad party' approach as being Zinovievists. But actually the shoe is on the other foot. At the height of his 'Bolshevisation' drive in the mid-1920s Zinoviev was a backer of the 'broad party' model that Proyect supports. This approach was reflected in the American CP's embrace of the Federated Farmer Labor Party adventure and other opportunistic short-cuts such as the Comintern's backing of the Croatian Peasant Party and the Peasant International. In the case of Britain Zinoviev discounted the small CPGB in favour of currying support from the top bureaucrats of the Trades Union Congress. As Trotsky put it in a comment that is applicable to many supporters of the 'broad party' model today,

Zinoviev gave us to understand that he counted on the revolution finding an entrance, not through the narrow gateway of the British Communist Party, but through the broad portals of the trade unions. The struggle to win the masses organised in the trade unions by the Communist Party

7 *Socialist Alternative and the ISO: perspectives for socialists*, originally published by Socialist Alternative, September 2002, www.sa.org.au/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1677&Itemid=152, accessed 1 January 2009; Mick Armstrong *On democratic centralism*, originally published in *Revolutionary organisation today*, Socialist Alternative, Melbourne 2000, pp. 25-35, www.sa.org.au/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=74&Itemid=124, accessed 1 January 2009.

was replaced by the hope of the swiftest possible utilisation of the ready made apparatus of the trade unions...⁸

Proyekt argues that attempting to build a socialist propaganda group to help lay the basis for a revolutionary workers party has nothing in common with the approach of Marx and Engels. August Nimitz has clearly documented how, in the 1840s, Marx and Engels worked in the Communist Correspondence Committees to propagandise for their ideas, debate rival socialists such as Wilhelm Weitling and Karl Grun and cohere a core of supporters around them.⁹ These efforts led to the formation of the Communist League in June 1847 which in the 'Circular of the First Congress of the Communist League to the League Members' specifically described itself as 'our propagandist League'. As for Marx not splitting with other socialist currents, the founding congress of the Communist League 'resolved unanimously to remove the Paris Weitlingians from the League'.¹⁰ Then there is Proyekt's claim that Marx and Engels were not interested in 'ideological litmus tests' – whatever they are. The long list of ideological polemics from the Marx/Engels stable—*The poverty of philosophy* directed against Proudhon, *Anti-Duhring*, *The critique of the Gotha Program* and *The Bakuninists at work*—to name just a few, points to the importance Marx/Engels attached to ideological clarity.

When it comes to offering an alternative approach for rebuilding the socialist movement or even a few modest concrete proposals to take things forward, Proyekt has precious little to offer. He can no more see the wood for the trees than the worst of the 'Leninist' sects he is at pains to deride for their undoubted sectarianism. Anti-Zinovievism has become his own sectarian shibboleth. I welcome serious debate and criticism of the limitations of *From little things big things grow*; Socialist Alternative is far from claiming that we have mapped out the road for taking the socialist movement forward. However, to be productive that debate needs to be rooted in more accurate concrete assessments of the socialist experience than Proyekt offers.

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