

**Leon Trotsky**

# **Sectarianism, Centrism and the Fourth International**

**Leon Trotsky Analyzes the Role of These Tendencies in the Revolutionary Movement**

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It would be absurd to deny the presence of sectarian tendencies in our midst. They have been laid bare by an entire series of discussions and splits. Indeed, how could an element of sectarianism have failed to manifest itself in an ideological movement which stands irreconcilably opposed to all the dominant organizations in the working class, and which is subjected to monstrous, absolutely unprecedented persecutions all over the world? Reformists and centrists readily seize upon every occasion to point a finger at our "sectarianism"; and most of the time, they have in mind not our weak but our strong side: our serious attitude toward theory; our effort to plumb every political situation to the bottom, and to advance clear-cut slogans; our hostility to "easy" and "comfortable" decisions which deliver from cares today, but prepare a catastrophe on the morrow. Coming from opportunists, the accusation of sectarianism is most often a compliment.

## **Marxian Distinctions**

Curiously enough, however, we are often accused of sectarianism not only by reformists and Centrists but by opponents from the "left," the notorious sectarians, who might well be placed as exhibits in any museum. The basis for their dissatisfaction with us lies in our irreconcilability to themselves, in our striving to purge ourselves of the infantile sectarian diseases, and to rise to a higher level.

To a superficial mind it may seem that such words as sectarian, centrists, etc., are merely polemical expressions exchanged by opponents for lack of other and more appropriate epithets. Yet the concept of sectarianism as well as the concept of centrism has a precise meaning in a Marxist dictionary. Marxism has built a scientific program upon the laws that govern the movement of capitalist society, and which were discovered by it. This is a colossal conquest! However, it is not enough to create a correct program. It is necessary that the working class accept it. But the sectarian, in the nature of things, homes to a stop upon the first half of the task. Active intervention into the actual struggle of the workers' masses is supplanted for him by an abstract propaganda of a Marxist program.

### **The Sectarian View of Society**

Every working class party, every faction passes during its initial stages through a period of pure propaganda, i.e., the training of its cadres. The period of existence as a Marxist circle ingrafts invariably habits of an abstract approach to the problems of the workers' movement. He who is unable to step in time over the confines of this circumscribed existence becomes transformed into a conservative sectarian. The sectarian looks upon the life of society as a great school, with himself as a teacher there. In his opinion the working class should put aside its less important matters, and assemble in solid rank around his rostrum: then the task would be solved.

Though he swear by Marxism in every sentence, the sectarian is the direct negation of dialectic materialism which takes experience as its point of departure, and always returns to it. A sectarian does not understand the dialectic action and reaction between a finished program and a living, that is to say, imperfect and unfinished mass struggle. The sectarian's method of thinking is that of rationalist, a formalist, and an enlightener. During a certain stage of development rationalism is progressive, being directed 'critically against blind beliefs and superstitions (the Eighteenth century!). The progressive stage of rationalism is repeated in every great emancipatory movement. But rationalism (abstract propagandism) becomes a reactionary factor the moment it is directed against the dialectic. Sectarianism is hostile to dialectics (not in words but in action) in the sense that it turns its back upon the actual development of the working class.

### **Ready-Made Formulas**

The sectarian lives in a sphere of ready made formulas. As a rule life passes him by without noticing him; but now and then he receives in passing such a fillip as makes him turn 180 degrees around his axis, and often makes him continue on his straight path, only ... in the opposite direction. Discord with reality engenders in the sectarian the need to constantly render his formulas more precise. This goes under the name of discussion. To a Marxist discussion is an important but a functional instrument of the class struggle. To the sectarian discussion is a goal in itself. However, the more that he discusses all the more do the actual tasks escape him. He is like a man who satisfies his thirst with salt water; the more he drinks, the thirstier he becomes. Hence the constant irritability of the sectarian. Who slipped him the salt? Assuredly,

the “capitulators” from the International Secretariat. The sectarian sees an enemy in everyone who attempts to explain to him that an active participation in the workers’ movement demands a constant study of objective conditions, and not haughty bulldozing from the sectarian rostrum. For analysis of reality the sectarian substitutes intrigue, gossip, and hysteria.

### **Twins and Antipodes**

Centrism is in a certain sense the polar opposite of sectarianism; it abhors precise formulas, seeks routes to reality outside of theory. But, despite Stalin’s famous formula, “antipodes” often turn out to be ... “twins.” A formula detached from life is hollow. Living reality cannot be grasped without theory. Thus both of them, the sectarian and the centrist, depart in the end with empty hands and join together ... in their feeling of animosity towards the genuine Marxist.

How many times have we met a smug centrist who reckons himself a “realist” merely because he sets out to swim without any ideological baggage whatever and is tossed by every vagrant current. He is unable to understand that principles are not dead ballast but a lifeline for a revolutionary swimmer. The sectarian, on the other hand, generally does not want to go swimming at all, in order not to wet his principles. He sits on the shores and reads lectures on morality to the flood of the class struggle. But sometimes a desperate sectarian leaps headlong into the water, seizes hold of the centrist and helps him drown. So was it; so will it be.

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In our epoch of disintegration and dispersion there are to be found a good many circles in various countries who have acquired a Marxist program, most often by borrowing it from the Bolsheviks, and who then turned their ideological baggage into a greater or lesser degree of ossification.

Let us take for example the best specimen of this type, namely the Belgian group led by comrade Vereecken. On August 10 the **Spartakus**, the organ of this group, announced its adherence to the Fourth International. This announcement was to be welcomed. But at the same time it is necessary to state beforehand that the Fourth International would be doomed if it made concessions to sectarian tendencies.

### **Vereecken’s Predictions**

Vereecken was in his own time an irreconcilable opponent of the entry of the French Communist League into the Socialist Party. There is no crime in this: the question was a new one, the step a risky one, differences were entirely permissible. In a certain sense, equally permissible, or, at any rate, unavoidable were exaggerations in the ideological struggle. Thus, Vereecken predicted the inevitable ruin of the international organization of the Bolshevik-Leninists as a result of its “dissolution” in the Second International. *We would advise Vereecken to reprint today in the **Spartakus** his yesteryear’s prophetic documents.* But this is not the chief evil. Worse yet is the fact that in its present declaration **Spartakus** confines itself to evasively

pointing out that the French section remained true to its principles “in a considerable, we may even say, a large measure.” If Vereecken behaved as a Marxist politician should, he would have stated clearly and definitely wherein did our French section depart from its principles, and he would have given a direct and an open answer to the question of who proved to be right: the advocates or the opponents of entry?

### **Democratic Centralism**

Vereecken is even more incorrect in his attitude toward our Belgian section that entered into the reformist Labor Party. Instead of studying the experiences resulting from the work carried on under new conditions and criticizing the actual steps taken, if they merit criticism, Vereecken keeps on complaining about the conditions of the discussion in which he suffered defeat. The discussion, you see, was incomplete, inadequate, and disloyal: Vereecken failed to satisfy his thirst with salt water. There is no “real” democratic centralism in the League! In relation to the opponents of the entry the League evinced ... “sectarianism.” It is clear that comrade Vereecken has a liberal and not a Marxist conception of sectarianism: in this he obviously draws close to the centrists. It is not true that the discussion was inadequate; it was carried, on for several months, orally and in the press, and on an international scale, besides. After Vereecken had failed to convince others that marking time in one place is the best revolutionary policy, he refused to abide by the decisions of the national and international organizations. The representatives of the majority told Vereecken on more than one occasion that if experience proved that the step taken was incorrect, we would rectify the mistake jointly. Is it really possible that after the twelve years’ struggle of the Bolshevik-Leninists you lack sufficient confidence in your own organization to preserve discipline of action even in case of tactical disagreements? Vereecken paid no heed to comradely and conciliating arguments. After the entry of the majority of the Belgian section into the Labor Party, the Vereecken group naturally found itself outside our ranks. The blame for this falls entirely upon its own shoulders.

### **Adaptation to “Legality”**

If we return to the gist of the question, then comrade Vereecken’s sectarianism stands out in all its dogmatic uncouthness. What’s this! cried Vereecken in indignation, Lenin spoke of breaking with reformists but the Belgian Bolshevik-Leninists enter a reformist party! But Lenin had in mind a break with the reformists as the inevitable consequence of a struggle against them, and not an act of salvation regardless of time and place. He required a split with the social-patriots not in order to save his own soul but in order to tear the masses away from social-patriotism. In Belgium the trade unions are fused with the party, the Belgian party is essentially the organized working class. To be sure, the entry of revolutionists into the Belgian Labor Party not only opened up possibilities but also imposed restrictions. In propagandizing Marxist ideas it is necessary to take into account not only the legalities of the bourgeois state but also the legalities of a reformist party (both these legalities, it may be added, coincide in a large measure). Generally speaking, adaptation to an alien “legality” carries with it an indubitable danger. But this did not prevent the Bolsheviks from utilizing even Czarist legality: for many

years the Bolsheviks were compelled to call themselves at trade union meetings, and in the legal press not social-democrats, but “consistent democrats.” True, this did not pass scot-free; a considerable number of elements adhered to Bolshevism who were more or less consistent democrats, but not at all international socialists; however, by supplementing legal with illegal activity, Bolshevism overcame the difficulties. Of course, the “legality” of Vandervelde, De Man, Spaak and other flunkies of the Belgian plutocracy imposes very onerous restrictions upon the Marxists, and thus engenders dangers. But Marxists, who are not as yet sufficiently strong to create their own party, have their own methods for the struggle against the dangers of reformist captivity: a clear-cut program, constant factional ties, international criticism, etc. The activity of a revolutionary wing in a reformist party can be judged correctly only by evaluating the *dynamics of development*. Vereecken does not do this either in regard to the faction *Action Socialiste Révolutionnaire* (Left-wing in Belgian Labor Party – *Ed.*), or the *Verité* group. Had he done so, he would have been compelled to admit that the A.S.R. has made a serious development forward in the recent period. What the final balance will be it is impossible to forecast as yet. But the entry into the Belgian Labor Party is already justified by experience.

### **Discussion as a Dogma**

Extending and generalizing his mistake, Vereecken asserts that the existence of isolated small groups which split away at different stages from our international organization is proof of *our* sectarian methods. Thus, the actual relationships are stood on their head. As a matter of fact, into the ranks of the Bolshevik-Leninists there came during the initial stages a considerable number of anarchistic and individualistic elements generally incapable of organizational discipline, and occasionally a mere failure who did not make his career in the Comintern. These elements viewed the struggle against “bureaucratism” in approximately the following manner: no decisions must ever be arrived at, but, instead, “discussion” is to be installed as a permanent occupation. We can say with complete justification that the Bolshevik-Leninists manifested a good deal, perhaps even a good deal too much patience toward such types of individuals and grouplets. Only since an international core has been consolidated that began to assist the national sections in purging their ranks of internal sabotage did there begin an actual and systematic growth of our international organization.

Let us take a few examples of groups that split from our international organization at various stages of its development.

### **A Strange Example**

The French periodical **Que Faire** is an instructive specimen of a combination of sectarianism with eclecticism. On the most important questions this periodical expounds the views of Bolshevik-Leninists, changing a few commas, and directing severe critical remarks at us. At the same time this periodical permits with impunity a defense of social-patriotic garbage, under the guise of discussion, and under the cover of “defending the U.S.S.R.” The internationalists of **Que Faire** are themselves unable to explain how and why they happen to cohabit peacefully

with social-patriots, after breaking with the Bolsheviks. It is clear, however, that with such eclecticism **Que Faire** is least capable of replying to the question what to do (*que faire*). The “internationalists” and the social-patriots are agreed on only one thing: never the Fourth International! Why? One must not “break away” from the communist workers. We have heard the self-safe argument from the S.A.P.: we must not break away from the social-democratic workers. In this instance, too, antipodes turn out twins. The peculiar thing, however, is that **Que Faire** is not connected and, by its very nature, cannot be connected with any workers.

There is even less to be said about such groups as *Internationale*, or *Proletaire*. They also abstract their views from the latest issues of **La Verité**, with an admixture of critical improvisations. They have no perspectives at all of revolutionary growth; but they manage to get along without perspectives. Instead of trying to learn within the framework of a more serious organization (to learn is difficult) these abhorers of discipline and very pretentious “leaders” desire to teach the working class (this appears to them to be easier). In moments of sober reflection they must themselves realize that their very existence as “independent” organizations is a sheer misunderstanding.

### **Field and Weisbord**

In the United States we might mention the Field and Weisbord groups. Field – in his entire political make-up – is a bourgeois radical who has acquired the economic views of Marxism. To have become a revolutionist Field would have had to work for a number of years as a disciplined soldier in a revolutionary proletarian organization; but he began by deciding to create a workers’ movement “of his own.” Assuming a position to our “left” (where else?), Field shortly entered into fraternal relations with the S.A.P. As we see, the anecdotic incident that befell Bauer was not at all accidental. The urge to stand to the left of Marxism leads fatally into the Centrist swamp.

Weisbord is indubitably closer to a revolutionary type than Field. But at the same time he represents the purest example of a sectarian. He is utterly incapable of preserving proportions either in ideas or in actions. Every principle he turns into a sectarian caricature. That is why even correct ideas become in his hands instruments for disorganizing his own ranks.

There is no need to dwell upon similar groups in other countries. They split from us not because we are intolerant or intolerable but because they themselves did not and could not go forward. Since the time of the split they have succeeded only in exposing their incapacity. Their attempts to unite with each other, on a national or an international scale, produced no results in any single case: peculiar to sectarianism is only the power of repulsion and not the power of attraction.

Some crank has computed the number of “splits” we have had and arrived at the sum of about a score. He saw in this annihilating evidence of our bad regime. The peculiar thing is that in the S.A.P. itself, which has triumphantly published these computations, there occurred, during the few years of its existence, more rifts and splits than in all our sections taken together. Taken by

itself, however, this fact is meaningless. It is necessary to take not the bald *statistics* of splits but the dialectics of development. After all its splits, the S.A.P. remained an extremely heterogeneous organization which will be unable to withstand the first onset of great events. This applies even to a larger measure to the "London Bureau of Revolutionary Socialist Unity" which is being torn asunder by irreconcilable contradictions: its tomorrow will consist not of "unity" but only of splits. In the meantime, the organization of the Bolshevik-Leninists, after purging itself of sectarian and centrist tendencies, not only grew numerically, not only strengthened its international ties, but also found the road to fusion with organizations akin to it in spirit (Holland, United States). The attempts to blow up the Dutch party (from the right, through Molinar!) and the American party (from the left, through Bauer!) have only led to the internal consolidation of both these parties. We can predict with assurance that parallel to the disintegration of the London Bureau there will proceed an ever more rapid growth of the organizations of the Fourth International.

### **The Road to the New International**

How the New International will take form, through what stages it will pass, what final shape it will assume – this no one can foretell today; and, indeed, there is no need to do so: historical events will show. But it is necessary to begin by proclaiming a *program* that meets the tasks of our epoch. On the basis of this program it is necessary to mobilize the co-thinkers, the pioneers of the New International. No other road is possible.

**The Communist Manifesto** of Marx and Engels, directly aimed against all types of utopian-sectarian socialism, forcefully points out that communists *do not* oppose themselves to the actual workers' movements but participate in them as a vanguard. At the same time the **Manifesto** was the program of a *new party*, national and international. The sectarian is content with a program, as a recipe of salvation. The centrist guides himself by the famous (essentially meaningless) formula of Edward Bernstein, "the movement is everything; the final goal – nothing." The Marxist draws his scientific program from the movement taken as a whole, in order then to apply this program to every concrete stage of the movement.

### **The Initial Difficulties**

On the one side, the initial steps of the New International are rendered more difficult by the old organizations and splinters from them: on the other side they are facilitated by the colossal experience of the past. The process of crystallization which is very difficult and full of torments during the first stages will assume in the future an impetuous and rapid character. The recent international events are of incommensurate significance for the formation of the revolutionary vanguard. In his own fashion, Mussolini – and this should be recognized – has "aided" the cause of the Fourth International. Great conflicts sweep away all that is halfway and artificial and, on the other hand, gives strength to all that is viable. War leaves room only for two tendencies in the ranks of the working class movement: social-patriotism which does not stop at any betrayal, and revolutionary internationalism that is bold and capable of going to the end. It is

precisely for this reason that centrists, fearful of impending events, are waging a rabid struggle against the Fourth International. They are correct in their own fashion: in the rear of great convulsions only that organization will be able to survive and develop which has not only cleansed its ranks of sectarianism but which has systematically trained them in the spirit of despising all ideological vacillation and cowardice.

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