Was there a Revolutionary Social Democracy?

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Finnish Revolution, 1917-18

Review essay of Eric Blanc's *Revolutionary Social Democracy. Working Class Politics Across the Russian Empire (1882-1917),* Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2021 (hardcover), Haymarket Books, 2022 (paperback).

Sometimes one comes across an important book from which one learns about many matters while disagreeing with its main theses. One such work is Eric Blanc's *Revolutionary Social Democracy. Working Class Politics Across the Russian Empire (1882-1917),* a book that is likely to become the focus of important debate on the left. This is a truly ambitious and encyclopedic history of what the author calls "revolutionary social democracy," meaning the political trajectory of the various social democratic parties in central and eastern Europe that followed the politics of "orthodox Marxism" particularly identified with the early Karl Kautsky—a major Marxist theoretician of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) at the turn of the 20th century, and editor of its journal *Die Neue Zeit*. Kautsky is best known for having been a leading opponent of the openly reformist "revisionism" proposed by his younger contemporary Edward Bernstein.

Besides the SPD, Blanc also follows the trajectory of the socialist parties in the borderlands of the Russian Tsarist Empire, in countries like Finland, Poland and Georgia, and especially of the Marxist socialist parties in those countries, such the SDKPiL (Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania), the party led by Rosa Luxemburg; the Jewish Bund; and the left-wing of the PPS (Polish Socialist Party). His work challenges many misconceptions about these parties. One important example involves the SDKPiL led by Rosa Luxemburg, which Blanc shows to have been far more centralized and organized from the top down than the Bolsheviks, the party that Rosa Luxemburg so intensely criticized for that very reason.

For Blanc, one common denominator in the political trajectory of these parties is that they were seriously impacted by the defeat of the 1905 Revolution. It was that defeat, he argues, that pushed

several Marxist parties to the right. Like the Russian Mensheviks, who adopted a more positive political orientation to the Russian bourgeoisie and ended up participating in the Provisional Government that was eventually overthrown by the October Revolution in 1917. Or like the Jewish Bund and the Ukrainian, Polish and Georgian Marxist parties, all of which followed the example of the Mensheviks in supporting the Kerensky government, which continued to support Russia's participation in the war and failed to distribute land to the peasants. Elsewhere in his book, he points out that this conservatizing impact also led a significant number of Marxist "revolutionary social democratic parties" to support the involvement of their respective countries in WW1, with the exception of only three important parties: the PPS-Left and the SDKPiL in Poland, and the LSDP (Latvian Social Democratic Party), all of which joined the Bolsheviks in opposing that war (11). In light of the fact that most of the "revolutionary social democratic parties" supported the war, the question arises whether this was only as a result of their move to the right after 1905, or the result of long-term political and social traits of those parties preceding 1905.

What makes a socialist party a revolutionary party?

The fact that the majority of the above mentioned Marxist parties ended up supporting WW1, thus siding with the capitalist imperialist powers of that time, indicates that Marxist theoretical orthodoxy does not by itself make a revolutionary party**.** To qualify as revolutionary—in the sense of seeking to abolish capitalism—a party must also be a combat oriented party in both strategic and tactical terms. In strategic terms in the sense of adjusting its overall, long-term policies to its expectation that a socialist revolution will have to rely on the widespread use of force, primarily because of the violent opposition to it by those in power. In tactical terms, in the sense of being ready to engage in combat in the short run to respond to any violent attacks by the right or the "forces of order" against the party itself or, more broadly, against working class and progressive organizations and institutions.

The strategic revolutionary use of force may lead to a major or a minor amount of violence and bloodshed depending on various circumstances, one of which relates to the existing relationship of forces between the revolution and the counterrevolution. If this relationship overwhelmingly favors the revolutionaries, the counterrevolutionaries might give up and surrender, thus eliminating more bloodshed. This is fundamentally what happened in Petrograd at the time of the October Revolution in 1917, when the revolutionaries prevailed with relatively few casualties on either side of the conflict. But when the relationship of forces fluctuates undecidedly between the two sides, a lot of blood flows, as it happened in Moscow, where the counterrevolutionaries were stronger than in Petrograd until the revolutionaries were able to prevail. But what needs to also be taken into account regarding the level of violence in a revolutionary conflict is the one perpetrated by the government in power before the armed encounter with the revolutionary forces, like the Tsarist government bloody repression of its opponents before it was overthrown in February of 1917.

In the case of the United States, any serious revolutionary socialist group must have a strategic long-term combat orientation given the very small likelihood that the ruling class will accept a peaceful transition to a socialist government. Even before that, it will likely dismantle the democratic political system the moment a socialist alternative becomes a real threat (a possibility that Karl Kautsky, in his better theoretical moments, contemplated for the Germany of his time). That is what the right-wing sectors of the ruling class are already trying to accomplish in the face of the comparatively much less threatening challenge to its political and economic power based on the substantial support coming from a decreasing white majority (found to have declined to 58 percent of the total population of the United States in the 2020 census). They are trying to accomplish this through a wide battery of measures aimed at restricting voting rights and vote counting safeguards, and by adopting extreme gerrymandering to sharply limit the political influence of racial and ethnic minority groups and white liberals, while propelling a vicious anti-immigrant agenda to make sure

the narrowing 58 percent white majority does not soon become a minority. Faced with the increasing crises generated by the growing climate and ecological changes leading to massive flooding, food scarcities and pandemics, punctuated by recurring wars and major recessions, such as the one that occurred in 2007-2008, the US government will increasingly turn to "exceptional" undemocratic measures and further endanger an American democracy that even in the best of times was substantially curtailed by practices such as the undemocratic nature of Senate representation and powers when compared with those of the House of Representatives, the existence of the Senate filibuster, and the unequal representation built into the Electoral College.

The weakness of democratic institutions and the readiness of reactionary forces to limit and even abolish democracy has a long history in the United States, as evidenced by the fact that it took no less than a bloody Civil War to abolish slavery, and by the subsequent violent oppression of Black people to keep them "in their place." Also witness the later persecution and jailing of socialists and anarchists during World War I, with the Palmer raids to deport foreign-born radicals shortly after that war was over, the dispossession and internment of Japanese Americans in WW2 and the impact of McCarthyism afterwards. It is these considerations that a socialist party should take into account in developing a long-term strategy to combat them, and to be tactically ready to respond in the appropriate conjunctures.

What faces us today are basically struggles for reforms and not for a revolutionary break, which is clearly not in the horizon. But what distinguishes the politics of revolutionary socialism in terms of their participation in reform struggles is its refusal to compromise the organizational and political independence, not only of working-class struggles, but more generally of the social movements fighting against various kinds of oppressions. This is paramount to preserve those organizations and movements as independent agents and prevent them from being co-opted and diverted into supporting the politics and priorities that are not theirs. This applies to joining coalition governments with pro-capitalist parties, labor-management cooperation schemes that move workers away from their adversarial relationship with the employers, no-strike pledges, and any other agreements that obscure the very real lines that divide the owners of capital from the workers.

It is precisely the combative perspective, in both the long and the short run, that is missing in Eric Blanc's analysis of what he calls "revolutionary" socialist parties. The absence of this perspective not only tinges his treatment of the non-revolutionary character of many of what he calls revolutionary parties, but also affects his historical interpretation of revolutionary events, as in the case of Lenin's famous "April Theses," that he presented on his return to Russia during the early stages of the Russian Provisional Government in 1917. Blanc argues that supporters of Lenin are wrong in claiming that the Theses were an attempt to change the orientation of the Bolshevik Party from supporting the Provisional government to opposing it. Blanc notes that although on March 3 (shortly after the overthrow of Tsarism), the Bolshevik Petersburg Committee decided not to support the Provisional Government, it resolved "not to oppose the Provisional Government power in so far as its actions comply to the best interests of the proletariat and the broad masses of the democracy and the people." That means, Blanc argues, that it is incorrect to claim that these Bolsheviks had adopted the Mensheviks position of unqualified support for the Provisional Government. Instead, their resolution merely implied that they did not immediately seek to overthrow the regime and would support any specific progressive measures it implemented. (373) Even if Blanc is correct in his interpretation of the Bolsheviks' position preceding Lenin's arrival in Russia, he misses the significance of the different assessment of the situation underlying Lenin's implicit criticism of the Bolsheviks position. In contrast with the Petersburg Bolsheviks, his assessment assumed a far more unstable, precarious and short-lived existence of a Provisional Government that was not likely to endure given the existing crises provoked by the exhaustion of Russia's continuing participation in the war, and whose political composition prevented it from delivering on the most elementary

popular demands for land, peace and bread. It was in light of that assessment that Lenin was trying, through his Theses, to harden the Bolshevik Party, including the Petersburg Committee members, in order to prepare them for the imminent crises facing the Provisional Government and the whole country. In effect, he was attempting to move the Bolsheviks's combat perspective from a general, strategic long-term orientation to a tactical one—a key transition, especially in the revolutionary situation they were entering.

Closely related to the absence of a combative perspective in Blanc's analysis, is his notion of "defensive politics," which he suggests is the way that revolutionaries do and should function, even asserting that the "October Revolution itself was also a 'defensive revolution' and (that) the Bolsheviks similarly cast their politics in defensive terms." It is true that there were circumstances which forced the Bolsheviks into adopting defensive positions. It could be argued, for example, that was the situation in which the Bolsheviks found themselves in the 1917 "July Days," a failed uprising that the Bolsheviks decided to support, not without misgivings, after it had broken out in the open. Or when the Bolshevik leadership practiced "transitional politics," like when it joined the demand for the removal of the "10 capitalist ministers," or non-socialist ministers, from the Provisional government in the early summer of 1917, as part of the Bolshevik effort to broaden their coalition to advance the revolutionary political agenda at a time when the situation was not yet ready for insurrection. However, the overall Bolshevik policy from March to November could hardly be considered defensive, as in fact it was strategically and tactically oriented towards a revolutionary insurrection.

Karl Kautsky

One of the purposes of Eric Blanc's new book it to rehabilitate Karl Kautsky, the leading theoretician of the German SPD, or more precisely the pre-1910 Kautsky, as a "revolutionary social democratic" leader. How does the "good Kautsky"—the Kautsky before 1910, the year he started on a right-wing path that eventually took him to oppose the October Revolution—measure up as a "revolutionary" leader in theory and in practice? For Kautsky, the revolution would not necessarily involve any kind of forceful or violent confrontational break**.** He did allow for the possibility of forceful ruling class resistance, but it is clear that he mostly expected a peaceful transition to socialism. As he stated in *The Road to Power* (1909), his single most important work addressing the issue of the overthrow of capitalism, that overthrow would take place based on the growth of a highly organized working class peacefully voting the bourgeoisie out of power against the background of a naturally decaying capitalist system: "we know that the proletariat must continue to grow in numbers and gain in moral and economic strength, and that therefore its victory and the overthrow of capitalism is inevitable." Kautsky's belief in the inevitability of the end of capitalism and the ascent of socialism was hardly unique to him. But in his particular case, it was linked to a "scientific" evolutionism, described by Massimo Salvadori in his *Karl Kautsky*, as the "fusion of Marxism and Darwinism [that] served to inspire Kautsky with a conception of the revolutionary process as the development of an organic necessity." (23) Kautsky's application of natural principles to social phenomena was, and is, a far cry from the Marxist dialectic method posing the opposition between conflicting and irreconcilable forces and interests as the dynamics governing a society. Organic analogies and their teleological character do not match the historical record of a relatively open and indeterminate processes where the objective possibilities that capitalist crises open to the working class and socialist movement have never been certainties as they have been missed, mishandled, or crushed, thus leading to defeats rather than to inevitable victories.

Having known about the bloody repressions to insurrectionary workers's and popular movements such as the classic case of the Paris Commune in 1871, Kautsky did allow for the theoretical possibility of a violent resistance by the ruling class. And yet, for reasons discussed below, he placed his expectations on a peaceful transition to power. That explains why he disregarded and even

dismissed any discussion about the preparation and education of the working class to overcome the violent resistance of the ruling class to the overthrow of capitalism, and the role of the SPD in that confrontation, which as he stated in The Road to Power: "The Socialist party is a revolutionary party, but not a revolution-making party…It is not part of our work to instigate a revolution or prepare the way for it…" (50)

Kautsky and the German Social Democratic Political Culture of his time

We cannot adequately understand Karl Kautsky's un-revolutionary politics unless we place him in the context of the society and party of which he was a leading theoretician, which could not but have influenced his general view of socialist politics, including his view of revolution. Germany, one of the most economically developed countries at the turn of the twentieth century, and with the most important social democratic party of Europe, could not be fully considered to be a parliamentary democracy. The political system at the time was substantially less than fully democratic, with limited suffrage rights and dangerous militaristic and imperialist tendencies. From 1878 to 1890, only twenty years before Kautsky's right turn, the SDP had been declared illegal under the Anti-Socialist laws, leading to the legal persecution of party activists many of who ended up in prison or in exile, an experience and memory that should have countered or at least tempered any optimism among its leaders despite the rapid growth in the party's membership and its electoral success. Most importantly, from 1918 to 1923, Germany, one of the most industrialized and wealthy countries in the world, witnessed a series of major revolutionary outbreaks led by the working class and their widespread bloody repression involving the direct participation of the regular forces of German "law and order" as well as of paramilitary formations supported and staffed to a considerable extent by embittered veterans of World War I.

Eric Blanc argues that the semi-authoritarian political context prevailing in the Germany of Kautsky's times led Marxists to adopt a strong educationalist ethos with an emphasis on building an organized proletarian subculture and patiently spreading the "good word" of socialism, rather than on promoting risky mass actions or winning immediate parliamentary reforms. (90-91) With this, Blanc is in effect conceding that Kautsky's SDP was not a revolutionary party. Yet, he glosses over that when he writes, without questioning it, that Kautsky and other revolutionary social democrats contended that the persistent promotion of proletarian education and collective association was revolutionary in itself, as long as it was consistently linked to the assertion of the party's end goals. (56)

That the assertion of final goals is not very meaningful unless these goals are continually nourished by the daily militant practice of party members and the working class, was not countenanced. Instead, the SPD put its focus on the growth of its parliamentary representation and of its unions, a growth that contributed to the rapid bureaucratization of the party—with the swelling of a party bureaucracy intent in playing the parliamentary game, and especially of a union bureaucracy intent in avoiding any risky militant actions in order to preserve its gains—and the development of a fairly conservative politics, particularly among its leading union leaders. Thus, for example, many SPD trade union leaders argued for moving what had become the traditional and important May Day strike to the Sunday closest to May 1, thereby making the strike a risk-free celebration instead of the symbolic but no less real expression of labor militancy**.** The union leaders also strongly opposed the expansion of the SPD youth movement that was well-known for its militant anti-militarist orientation (militant left-wing youth sections have been a frequent feature of conservative and bureaucratic social democratic parties.)

At the same time, the SPD created a dense network of schools, clubs, associations, and festivals that established an alternative world for the German working class. Some students of the German SPD, such as Guenther Roth in *The Social Democrats in Imperial Germany. A Study in Working Class*

Isolation and National Integration (1963), saw this alternative world as a separate subculture walled off from mainstream institutions and values. Twenty-five years later, Vernon L, Lidtke, another student of the SPD, argued against Roth, in *The Alternative Culture. Socialist Labor in Imperial Germany* (1988) that the impressive set of alternative social institutions created by German Social Democracy, was in fact influenced by mainstream German culture. Specifically, Lidtke held that "ideological vagueness tended to win over theoretical precision and traditions from various segments of German *burgerlich* society and culture were carried over into the labor movement." (191) Independently of Roth's and Lidtke's arguments, it is clear that the political culture sponsored by the SPD encouraged passivity rather than an outward looking militant stance aiming at establishing its political hegemony over German society at large.

The fact that the SPD's bureaucratization and its alternative social world ended up encouraging in the German working class of the early twentieth century a culture of political adaptation instead of resistance to the imperial German social and economic juggernaut had been recognized by important thinkers outside of the socialist and Marxist traditions. Max Weber was highly skeptical of the revolutionary pretentions of much of the SPD's leadership and denied that the SPD was a revolutionary party. Weber's views were likely influenced by the work of Robert Michels, *Political Parties,* exposing, in great detail, the bureaucratic and anti-democratic character of the German SPD. Scholars Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Lawrence A. Scaff have noted that there was a close personal and mutual intellectual influence between Max Weber and Robert Michels, which was reflected in the structural, sociological influence of Weber on Michels' major work.

Michels' claim that his research on the SPD proved the existence of an "iron law of oligarchy" is highly questionable. What he proved is the existence of an oligarchical tendency in political organization that could be balanced and overcome by democratic counter-tendencies. That he later became a supporter of Fascism, does not detract at all from the validity and devastating character of his findings. Michels originally published his classic in 1911, which suggests that his research was mostly carried out in the years when the "good Kautsky" was proclaiming "orthodox Marxism" in an organization that had already gone a long way to become the very opposite of a "revolutionary social democratic party."

Reflecting the predominant ideology of the SPD that viewed itself as a working-class bulwark but not as a party aspiring to acquire the political hegemony over all oppressed groups in the country, Kautsky's politics, like that of most other SPD leaders, were "workerist" in that it grossly underestimated the need to address the problems of the rural population and the middle class to win them over as allies of a working-class movement that would then function as a true "tribune of the people." Instead, the SPD's opposition to land distribution on the schematic grounds that it would reinforce capitalist social relations was blind to the social class and political realities of Germany. Compare this attitude with the Bolshevik's shrewd decision to adopt the Socialist Revolutionary (SR) program of land distribution (in usufruct rather than as private property that could be bought and sold as commodities) as part of the program of the October Revolution. The political blindness of the SDP had enormously tragic consequences when it later facilitated middle class and rural support for the Nazis.

Eric Blanc knows all of this and much more. It is true that Kautsky should have kept present the lessons of the German anti-socialist laws and of the massacres that occurred after the smashing of the Paris Commune. But Blanc is familiar with that plus over an additional century of violent capitalist repression of rebellions and revolutions. It is true that capital has increased its huge capacity and power to crush revolutions. But by the same token, it is not tenable to put forward an ambiguous position regarding the possibility of a peaceful road to socialism or to maintain, as he does throughout this book, that an entirely defensive politics can be successful in gaining power.

The Failed Finnish Revolution of 1918

To prove the potential of the "defensive politics" of this "revolutionary social democracy," Blanc points to the revolution led in 1918 by the Finnish Social Democratic Party. Blanc's own analysis of the Finnish social democrats, including the party's left, more radical wing, actually shows that their commitment to "defensive politics" regardless of circumstances led to do too little and too late to actually take power.

Finland, was, at the time of World War I, a small country attached to the Tsarist empire. It enjoyed a substantial degree of autonomy under that regime. Its economy was mostly agricultural: while 15 percent of its labor was engaged in industrial activity, 71 percent was involved in agriculture and forestry, although half of the labor force in those areas were wage workers.

As Eric Blanc tells the story, since its foundation in 1899 the Finnish SDP had a parliamentary orientation and did not call for even the gradual contest of power, let alone for an empire wide revolution, but instead called for universal suffrage. The party considered the general strike a risky tactic and instead tended to see the legal system as a solution to many political problems. Pointing to the party's development oriented to proletarian organization and electoral work, and downplaying mass action, Blanc argues that "while focusing on mass action proved to be indispensable for revolutionary practice in the rest of the Russian empire, the Finnish experience shows that there was no universal, 'one size fits all' approach for the most effective socialist balance of working-class association, education and action." (139) But this poses the question of whether mass action **is** simply a tool among others, or whether it has a prominent strategic and tactical role to play **in** a presumably revolutionary party. Moreover**,** the prioritization of building the party with a focus on internal education and electoral work **is** likely to lead to political passivity.

The political situation of Finland under Tsarism at the turn of the twentieth century was similar to the one in Germany after the abolition of the Anti-Socialist laws in 1890. So much so, that, as in Germany, the Tsarist government allowed the SPD to run for Parliament. But when the SPD won a parliamentary majority in 1916, the Tsarist government blocked the parliament from meeting. After the February 1917 revolution in Russia, when as a result Finland was left without an army or even police, the SDP did come to power although in a coalition government with the bourgeois parties. In doing this, the Finnish SDP was clearly to the right of Karl Kautsky who had criticized socialist leader Millerand for entering the same type of coalition government in France. But when the Finnish coalition cabinet approved legislation that transferred all imperial prerogatives to parliament except for foreign policy and military affairs, the Russian Provisional Government led by Kerensky and with the support of the Finnish right, removed the Social Democrats from the government, an act supported by the Menshevik-Socialist Revolutionary leadership of the Petrograd Soviet, the same people that, as Blanc points out, would a few months later denounce the Bolsheviks for dissolving the Constituent Assembly.

The dissolution of the Finnish parliament opened the road for a mass radicalization clearly leading to a revolutionary explosion. In the midst of this red-hot situation, elections were held the following October. Although the Social Democrats declared that the elections were illegitimate, they decided to participate in any case and lost the elections by a narrow margin. The SDP continued to insist that the elections had been illegal from the start and that their defeat was the result of electoral fraud. The Social Democrats' narrow loss may have been due at least in part to the fact that the party chose to campaign just on the issue of national independence from Russia while saying little about its social objectives, an approach that was consistent with its long-time commitment to play down radicalism in pursuit of its purely defensive policies and methods. A major outcome of the October elections was the right-wing government's decision to reestablish order and disarm the worker guards that had been established in September with the consent of SDP party and trade union

leaders in the context of a mass radicalization exacerbated by a worsening food shortage. (Risto Alapuro, *State and Revolution in Finland,* 48-49) At the same time, upper class forces began to create and develop their own paramilitary forces to restore order and protect themselves from widespread "anarchy," which was the right-wing term for what was in fact an insurrectionary explosion.

Blanc addresses the critical question of why the SDP leadership at the high point of revolutionary agitation and strength after the SPD had lost the October elections**,** was unable to reach agreement on seizing power and instead called for a general strike on November 14, 1917. Blanc acknowledges that latter critics of the SPD leadership had good points to make regarding the party's actions during those critical days especially because it allowed the bourgeois forces to build up their troops in the two subsequent months. He nevertheless insists that "there was no way of knowing during the general strike whether a more favorable moment for taking power might subsequently present itself." (144) While undoubtedly an interesting analytical question from the point of view of an outside observer, it is dangerously irrelevant for those directly involved in the struggle from a tactical combat perspective. From this latter perspective, the decisive question was whether there was a reasonable chance for the revolutionary forces to prevail in an attempt to seize power in November or whether it would have been premature, if not suicidal to attempt to do so.

In fact, as the Finnish socialist Pekka Haapakoski has noted, in response to the actions of the right-wing government, during one week from November 14 to 19, when the general strike was at last declared, the power was *de facto* in the hands of the workers. Local strike committees controlled the situation, disarming and often arresting local authorities, and controlled food supply through their own channels. (Pekka Haapakoski, "Finska klasskriget 1918" *Internationalen,* #5-7, 1974 translated from Swedish by Hannu Reime.) For their part, the SDP leaders, although participating in the general strike, were not capable of seizing that key political moment because they had no vision of what would be done with the power they had obtained since their whole previous history had not politically or psychologically prepared them to engage in organized revolutionary action. As Haapakoski also noted, the response to the Finnish right-wing backlash coincided with the Bolshevik Revolution in November. The Bolsheviks were not able to provide significant material aid to the Finnish revolution before its defeat in early 1918 mostly because after losing considerable territory to the German Army, they were then involved in peace negotiation with the Germans at Brest Litovsk under very unfavorable conditions. Nevertheless, the victorious revolution in Russia did contribute to the militant spirit of the Finnish working class.

As it happened, it was in January 1918 that the SDP leadership chose the revolutionary option, precisely at the time when the forces at their disposal were in fact much weaker than in November. At this time, the Red Guards were far from ready to wage war. The revolution had a defensive character as expressed by the passivity of the military operations with the socialists, unlike the Whites, devoting insufficient attention to the development of their military plans and resources. After Helsinki and southern Finland were under their control, the revolutionaries adopted a passive strategy to concentrate their efforts on administering this area rather than develop their military operations to occupy the whole country (157-158) It might very well be that in light of the substantial military intervention of the Germans the revolutionaries did not have a chance to win, but nevertheless the defensiveness, lateness and hesitations of the "revolutionary social democrats" did not at all help the revolution's chances. Thus, while revolutionaries are often compelled to act in defensive terms, this approach is fatally flawed in the context of a revolutionary upsurge when defensiveness means acting too little and too late, and particularly not acting to win.

Blanc refers to an SDP left led by people like O.W. Kuusinen, who years later would become a leading figure in the Finnish Communist Party that in fact may have perhaps better represented Blanc's "revolutionary social democracy" than the mainstream leadership of the party. Based on

Blanc's account, one cannot but conclude that this was a vacillating group since they first resisted the entry of the SDP into a coalition government with the bourgeoisie but, as Blanc put it, 'eventually went along with the entry of social democrats into a "national unity" government in April 1917,' although at the same time they refused to take political responsibility for it.

In the context of discussing the SPD left's positive contributions to the party, Blanc criticizes the "Leninist" notion that revolutionaries should not participate in the same parties as reformists. In my view, however, this issue cannot be discussed in abstract general terms, but must take into account the relationship of forces between revolutionaries and reformists in a particular time and place. Such a key consideration may lead to the conclusion that revolutionaries, particularly if they are weak in numbers and strength, should definitely join those social democratic formations if these are real expressions of working-class consciousness and activity or have become a pole of attraction for left-wing activists. But that is not the end of the story, but rather whether revolutionaries should stay forever in those formations or whether substantially different social and political conditions may require that they split and form an independent revolutionary organization, particularly if, for example, a mass movement develops that the social democratic party opposes or refuses to support.

Finally, it is also important to point out that the defeated Finnish revolution while of course progressive as a democratic revolution, did not make any changes that could be considered to be socialist in any meaningful sense of the term. Thus, even when the Social Democrats issued a program called "We Demand" at the height of their strength in November 1, the central demands included the election of a constituent assembly, immediate action on food and employment, implementation of the reforms approved by the previous parliament, and the dissolution of the bourgeois civil guards. Had the January 1918 Revolution succeeded, Finland would have then most likely become a progressive**,** democratic, parliamentary republic with a significantly regulated capitalist economy. Perhaps the most important social gain would have been the enfranchisement of tenant farmers and their transformation into small holders. In 1901, the tenant farmers had constituted 17 percent of agrarian households compared with 35 percent for landowners and 48 percent for agricultural workers. (Alapuro, 150, 158-159, 43).

Parliamentary democracy or Council Democracy?

An important component of any party, especially that of any socialist party, including Blanc's "revolutionary social democratic" parties, is the kind of economic and political system they envision for the society they seek to attain. Yet, Eric Blanc, only glosses through that topic criticizing "the rigid parliamentarism and legalism of modern social democrats, not to mention Leninism's dubious projection of soviet power as the universal mode of working-class rule," and recommending a vague "strategic flexibility" on the issue. This will hardly do as an adequate answer, particularly in the light of his exhaustive historical account and analysis of what he calls "revolutionary social democracy."

Many leftists and socialists regard a parliamentary system as a neutral institutional tool that can be used to democratically rule capitalist as well as socialist societies. Do Blanc's "revolutionary social democrats" agree with this view? Does Blanc himself? Because as critical as he seems to be of what he calls the "modern rigid" parliamentarism, he seems to favor Kautsky's politics primarily focused on a peaceful transition to socialism through a parliamentary elected majority of socialists. As equivocal or evasive as Blanc's position might be on this question, it is worth posing it in the open: is parliamentary rule appropriate for a socialist democracy that involves not only political but also economic democracy? I would argue for entertaining the alternative Blanc ambiguously sidelines, the one based on workers councils, as the most appropriate institutional form for this new type of political and economic democracy.

What were the Soviets as the workers' councils were called in the Russian language? At the turn of

the twentieth century all illegal Marxist groups in the Tsarist empire expected an anti-Tsarist insurrection to be led by the political representatives of the working class, namely the Marxist groups and parties themselves. They were very surprised when during the 1905 Revolution, in the course of a strike wave that spread from Moscow to St. Petersburg in October of that year, the striking workers themselves began to elect, on their own initiative, deputies (*starosti)* from their respective factories to represent them in councils—soviets—that they formed to discuss and decide on a wide variety of political and economic issues facing the working class and the country. These soviets soon turned into a general political organ representing all workers, and their revolutionary movement in Petrograd.

The soviets re-emerged with the overthrow of Tsarism in February 1917, in a fashion similar to that of 1905, along with workers control of factories and major industrial establishments, and with the elected delegates to these councils subject to immediate recall by their constituents. These 1917 soviets spread from Petrograd to other large cities, industrial towns, cities and later to non-proletarian, smaller and more remote locations, becoming, in essence, a rival "dual power" to the Provisional Government by increasingly taking over government functions. A number of political parties became very active and indeed dominant in the soviets. These included the Socialist Revolutionaries (SR), Mensheviks, Bolsheviks, Anarchists and a number of smaller socialist groups. By the late summer and early fall of 1917, the Bolsheviks had obtained a majority in the soviets, which in turn became the political base of support for the successful October Revolution.

It is this organizational council form, or its close equivalents, that have repeatedly sprung up in many different revolutionary and insurgent movements since the Russian Revolution, whether during the Spanish Civil War, the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, Allende's Chile of the early seventies and the Portuguese Revolution in the mid-seventies, as the work of the late Colin Barker has shown. It points to the fact that the grass roots insurgencies of workers and their class allies have repeatedly aimed for the kind of direct control through such mechanisms as the right of immediate recall of elected representatives that conventional parliamentary democracy is unable to provide.