

Workers and Leaders

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I have considered myself a Marxist for forty years, yet my main concern for quite a lot of that time is that working people have more control over their own lives. That's not necessarily going to be the case if a communist party comes to power. Then political cadres transform themselves into bureaucrats and "lord it over" working people. We can see that in China, Vietnam and Cuba.

I think part of the problem is that Leninist or communist parties are traditionally led by "de-classed bourgeois intellectuals." Even if those are "petty bourgeois" rather than bourgeois intellectuals, the fact is that most of those folks carry within themselves a sense of entitlement. They think of it as naturally their right, even their "calling," to speak for the workers. They believe workers need people to represent them and that they are those people.

I have been involved in the trade union movement for many years now, never as someone who works for a union, but rather as a rank-and-file union member. I have seen it demonstrated over and over again that we working people are perfectly capable of speaking for and representing ourselves. It may be true that we don't come naturally to a socialist consciousness, but we do quite naturally come to the ideas that we need to work together and to be fair and equitable with one another.

Those latter notions are not ideas divorced from reality. I have seen them demonstrated over and over again. Of course, not every working person is going to come to such conclusions and act accordingly. However, I have seen even the most selfish, self-centered coworkers come to the defense of their sisters and brothers when faced with threats from the boss.

Working people can generate their own organizations, quite naturally growing out of situations like those above. Then the problem is, how do you ensure these groups have staying power; that they're not just flash-in-the-pan entities created only to deal with a specific grievance or situation and then fade away? We have seen that with Obama for America. The problems are at least twofold. One is that many working people's organizations come together spontaneously (or almost so) to accomplish specific things or deal with particular situations. Once those things are accomplished or those situations are dealt with, they lose their purpose.

The way people most often deal with that is to choose a leadership that will be around from one crisis to the next. The problem is that those leaders then tend to think of themselves as entitled to lead and that they are somehow better; that they know more and therefore, people should listen to them and not to others.

It's a problem that's been seen with every political revolution. Working people, whether the sans culottes of the French Revolution, the proletarians of the Bolshevik Revolution or the peasants of China and Vietnam, do the fighting and dying which bring Milovan Djilas's "new class" to power. Then, just as in Orwell's *Animal Farm*, "The pigs began to look more like humans every day."

It's called "puttin' on airs," "emulating your 'betters'." Leaders act the way they think leaders are supposed to act, and this begins to separate them from working people. No matter how well intentioned the leaders are, if they have people surrounding them who are constantly telling them how good they are; how wise their decisions are, they're going to develop an inflated sense of self-worth, and thus entitlement. Then the Shanghai limousines get driven around town and people like Zhang Zhunzhiao write pamphlets like "On the Curbing of Bourgeois Right."

These problems are exacerbated by the natural tendencies of the "revolutionary masses," the working stiffs, like us, to want to get back to productive work, to earning a paycheck, to going home and playing with our children and surfing the Net. Periods of "punctuated equilibrium," of revolutionary fervor, of intense activity are naturally followed by periods of quietude in which most people want to return to uneventful, daily routines.

It's then that we have the danger of revolutionary leaders listening to the "yes" men with whom they surround themselves, looking in the mirror and thinking they see the "fairest one of all" staring back at them, and not just an ordinary Joe or Jane.

It's then that Thermidor occurs. Relations become frozen, stiff, they start to ossify. Leaders become misleaders. It's like in Eugene Ionesco's play, *The Rhinoceros*. Those ugly creatures come to town. Suddenly, they start appearing everywhere, and the heroine looks from her boyfriend to the rhinoceri and says, "Look how beautiful they are! How strong!" And she rejects her boyfriend for a rhinoceros.

So what are we working people supposed to do, if we don't want a "new class" springing up; if we don't want the pigs to start looking more like humans; if we want a team of leaders to remain a team, and not degenerate into grasping, competing, power-hungry individuals?

We might think, no, that's not going to happen. Well, we've said the same before. We've been disappointed before. The solution is like that Jefferson proposed: to have a revolution every twenty years. But in the 21st century time is encapsulated into ever-smaller units. We don't have twenty years to figure out how to do something all over again, not in our era of extremely rapid change. In the case of a nation, we've got to hope and actually see to it, to the degree that's even possible, that an Occupy or something similar appears regularly on the scene to keep us honest. Maybe then we can avoid a Thermidor. Maybe then we can avoid falling in love with a rhinoceros. Maybe we working people can keep our leaders honest.

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