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## *On Democratic Centralism*

In the recent period, alongwith a number of critical discussions on the electoral set-back suffered by the CPI (M) and the Left in last Lok Sabha elections, there have been some questions raised about the practice of democratic centralism as the organizational principle of the Communist Party. Such critiques have come from persons who are intellectuals associated with the Left or the CPI (M).

Since such views are being voiced by comrades and persons who are not hostile to the Party, or, consider themselves as belonging to the Left, we should address the issues raised by them and respond. This is all the more necessary since the CPI (M) considers the issue of democratic centralism to be a basic and vital one for a party of the working class.

Instead of dealing with each of the critiques separately, we are categorising below the various objections and criticisms made. Though, it must be stated that it is not necessary that each of them hold all the views expressed by the others. But the common refrain is that democratic centralism should not serve as the organizational principle of the Communist Party or that it should be modified.

What are the points made in these critiques? They can be summed up as follows:

## THE MARXIST

1. Democratic centralism is characterized as a Party organizational structure fashioned by Lenin to meet the specific conditions of Tsarist autocracy which was an authoritarian and repressive regime. Hence, its emphasis on centralization, creating a core of professional revolutionaries and secrecy. Thus democratic centralism is unsuitable for other societies and conditions and particularly where bourgeois democracy holds sway.
2. Democratic centralism is accused of creating a hierarchical, centralized structure which stifles democracy and democratic functioning. The writ of the Polit Bureau and Central Committee runs. The party members and cadres are to carry out the directives of the Central Committee. Contrary or dissenting views have no place to be heard or considered.
3. Democratic centralism is also held responsible for stifling creative thinking and development of Marxist theory. The top bodies of the party set out theory and it becomes a closed system which precludes any fresh thinking or absorbing new developments. Democratic centralism is suited to a structure where theory is interpreted by the leading bodies and it is carried out by the ranks. Theoretical discussions outside the approved framework is frowned upon, or worse seen as 'indiscipline'.
4. A party based on democratic centralism enables the party leadership to disregard the opinion of the party as a whole. This creates a barrier between the people and the Party. It prevents correction of a wrong position in time due to barrier in communication.
5. As far as the CPI (M) is concerned, democratic centralism in practice has been distorted with centralization and commandism in West Bengal with no heed paid to views from below. On a general plane, it is asserted that a mass revolutionary party cannot be built with the Leninist form of organization. Wrong tactical line being formulated can also be attributed to the wrong organizational practice.

### I

The principle of democratic centralism has always been attacked by social democrats and non-Marxist leftists ever since the Bolshevik Party adopted it and when it was extended by the Communist International to all Communist parties in its third Congress in 1921.

When Lenin expounded and developed Marxist theory beyond what was set out by Marx and Engels, among his key contributions were the theory of imperialism, the role of the peoples of the colonial

and semi-colonial countries in the world revolutionary movement and the concept of a revolutionary organisation.

At the heart of the issue is not just the organisational structure of the Party, but the basic role of a Communist Party. For social democratic parties, whose perspective is to work within the capitalist system itself, the need for a revolutionary organisation does not arise. Hence democratic centralism is anathema to them. For a Communist Party which works to overthrow capitalism and in India the bourgeois-landlord order, and replace it eventually with socialism, Party organisation has to be one which is equipped to wage the political, ideological and organisational struggle against the powerful State and the dominant ruling classes. Such a Party organisation cannot be only geared to fight elections in a parliamentary democratic system, however stable and long-lasting it is, or to be engaged only in exercising and utilising the democratic rights and institutions available within the framework of the hegemony of a bourgeois state.

The key issue would be whether the party is equipped to organise and lead the working class and the revolutionary mass movement? Lenin's conception of the Party was to build an organisation which could prepare and develop such a revolutionary mass movement. For this he stressed the importance of recruiting the advanced sections of the working class into the Party who can be made politically conscious and hence constitute the vanguard. Such an organisation is steeled through class struggle and mass movements and is able to function in all conditions – of legality, semi-legality and illegality. The exigencies of class politics require an organisation which is able to change the forms of struggle according to the prevailing situation. This requires a centralised party. Democratic centralism is best suited as the organizational principle for a party based on Marxism and class struggle. Class struggle is a collective act. Democratic centralism promotes collective decision making and collective activity; it allows for freedom of thought and unity in action.

For collective functioning to be effective, it requires going beyond the democratic method of decision making by majority opinion to bind the entire collective into implementing that decision. It is only democratic centralism which requires the minority to abide by the majority and the individual to submit to the will of the collective. The debates between Lenin, the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks in the Russian Social Democratic Party clarified some of the essential features

## THE MARXIST

of a revolutionary party and its organisation. Outside Russia, some of the prominent Marxist leaders like Karl Kautsky and Rosa Luxemburg criticised the Leninist idea of party organisation. For Kautsky, organisation was a precondition for revolutionary action. Rosa Luxemburg held that organisation is a product of the revolutionary mass movement. For Lenin, the Party and its organisation were both a precondition and a result of the revolutionary mass movement. As Lukacs brilliantly summed up the Leninist concept, *the Party is both the producer and the product of the revolutionary mass movement.*<sup>1</sup> For Lenin, the Party is an organisation which prepares for the revolution; such an organisation has to be equipped to deal with all eventualities including the attack by the class enemies both on the political and organisational plane. Such an organisation has to have the strictest party discipline. It is only such a discipline which will enable the party to adjust to changed situations and to have the flexibility to change the forms of struggle.

To view democratic centralism divorced from a party adhering to Marxism and the class struggle will lead to a distorted understanding of this vital principle of party organisation.

## II

What are the arguments against democratic centralism?

### *1. Specific to Russian Conditions*

One of the main arguments of the critics of democratic centralism has been the specificity of this organizational practice for the Russian revolutionary movement. It was developed in Russia during the revolutionary struggle against Tsarism. The Bolshevik party facing repression and exile needed an organization which could work in these illegal conditions. It got consolidated after the revolution as the counter revolutionary forces tried to suppress the revolutionary regime and it was backed by imperialist intervention. It was adopted by other communist parties. Can an organizational principle which served Russian conditions be adopted for parties working in different situations and conditions?

But can it then be said that it was Russia-specific and cannot be

applied to other countries and other situations where communist parties work?

Prabir Purkayastha says:

The specific form of the Party came after the Bolshevik revolution when factions were banned. It could be argued that this was a specific form of the party necessitated by a revolutionary state besieged by all great powers in the fledgling socialist state. *The party evolving a command and control structure* of democratic centralism is a consequence of this situation and not a general principle. To carry forward this structure to all conditions and situations that was an exigency of a specific time and place does have implications for the Left movement today.

That having been said, it is important that the Left re-examines the issue of democratic centralism. While the command and control structures has helped the CPI (M) to survive the disintegration that has overtaken many of the powerful Communist Parties that existed elsewhere, its problems are all too real, the major one being that the opinion of the Party as a whole can be disregarded by the Party leadership. This can lead to a dissonance between the masses and the leaders and also create barriers between the people and the Party. At times when the Party needs a course correction, democratic centralism can carry on with a wrong position for longer due to this barrier in communications.<sup>2</sup>

While it is true that democratic centralism was evolved by the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party and Lenin played the instrumental role in fleshing out the concept, the fact is that organizational forms and practices are integrally linked to the revolutionary character of the Party. It is not the Russian party alone which faced attack and it was not the Russian revolution alone which was sought to be suppressed by foreign intervention. Every revolution in the 20<sup>th</sup> century underwent the same process of repression, counterrevolution/civil war and foreign intervention. If Russia had the Tsarist repression, the Chinese communists faced the brutal repression of the Kuomintang; if Russia faced civil war, so did China, Cuba and other countries. Foreign intervention took place in China, Vietnam, Korea and Cuba. Even the peaceful and democratic assumption to government through elections in Chile saw its brutal displacement by a military coup.

Apart from the Chinese, Vietnamese and Korean revolutions, the

## THE MARXIST

Cuban revolution is an example. Here the revolutionary takeover was not led by the Communist Party. But after the revolutionary forces were consolidated into the Cuban Communist Party after the overthrow of the old order, the party organized itself on the lines of democratic centralism.

There is as yet no instance of any revolution or advance to socialism where the party or organization leading the process has not been organized on the lines of democratic centralism.

In Venezuela, where there is a 'revolutionary process', Chavez found it necessary to transform his 'movement' into a party. That party is not run on democratic centralism but it runs with a centralism which is centred on Chavez himself. How far this process can be taken forward without a centralized party remains to be seen.

Why have all the parties that led revolutionary movement embraced democratic centralism? This is because no revolution is allowed to advance democratically and peacefully. Every revolution has to face attacks by imperialism and the class enemies. Without democratic centralism, the party is disarmed and cannot be a revolutionary organization. The important point Lenin made of the party acting as a centralized force against the powers of the modern centralised state applies even now and to all countries. In fact, it has become more essential, given the highly advanced and mobile force that imperialism can marshal against any revolutionary force.

It is not only direct military intervention that has to be met, every revolution that takes place under a globally dominant imperialist system will be a revolution under siege. There will not be any time in the foreseeable future where socialism is going to flower under a peaceful and benevolently democratic atmosphere. As Fidel Castro quoting Lenin once said: 'No revolution is worth its name, if it cannot defend itself'. Democratic centralism is an essential armour of that defence.

The other corollary point made is that democratic centralism is suited for parties in a revolutionary situation. Lenin had forged democratic centralism in the period of the actuality of the revolution. How can that principle be applied in countries where there is parliamentary democracy, legality and bourgeois decreed democratic rights?

It is not counterrevolutionary violence alone that has to be countered.

The Party has to move with a single purpose politically. It has to preserve and protect its ideological basis. The bourgeois State and the ruling classes are constantly trying to disrupt the political-ideological cohesion of the Party and to deflect it to reformist class collaboration. The war of ideas and the ideological struggle cannot be conducted effectively by a Party which abandons democratic centralism. Without democratic centralism, the Party would get converted into a discussion forum or a debating society.

Many Communist parties have operated in a non-revolutionary situation in the second half of the twentieth century. The situation has become more so in the first decade of the twenty first century. But many of these parties have survived because they adhered to democratic centralism. Whatever the ideological political weaknesses or mistakes, democratic centralism has kept them alive with potential as a revolutionary party. Whereas those parties which abandoned democratic centralism either ceased to be Communist parties or disintegrated. The classic example is the Italian Communist Party, the biggest party outside the socialist countries till the early eighties. But much before the collapse of the Soviet Union, it began the journey to liquidation by first giving up democratic centralism and culminating in giving up Marxism (or scientific socialism).

Even for a Communist party with some popular base, functioning in a multi-party parliamentary democratic system, the attacks and pressures on the party are continuous and relentless. These come in the form of ideological and political attacks and efforts to disorganize and weaken the Party. Even in a peaceful time, the class struggle leads to a constant attack, as the Party is fighting against the ruling class policies. This is the experience of the CPI (M) too. While the political and ideological terrain of struggle is primary, they cannot be conducted effectively without an organization which can counter the multifaceted attempts to disorganise it. Without democratic centralism, there can be only a social democratic party – not a revolutionary one.

Democratic centralism is equated with a ‘command and control structure’. This is then extended to claim that ‘the opinion of the Party as a whole’ can be disregarded by the Party leadership. Does centralism mean command and control? Is it proper to negate centralism on the grounds that it fosters a command and control

## THE MARXIST

structure? For a politically conscious Party member, centralism embodies the collective will and purpose, and not commandism. It is the exercise of both centralism and inner-Party democracy that constitutes democratic centralism. The CPI (M) Constitution has a whole section (Article XIII) on the principles of democratic centralism and how it should work in the Party. Of relevance to the discussion, here are the clauses (c) and (d):

(c) All Party committees shall periodically report their work to the Party organisation immediately below and all lower committees shall likewise report to their immediate higher committee;

(d) All Party committees, particularly the leading Party committees, shall pay constant heed to the opinions and criticism of the lower Party organisations and the rank-and-file Party members.

The CPI (M) Constitution provides for ‘free and frank discussion within the Party unit on all questions affecting the Party, its policy and work’, but it does not permit factional groups or factionalism within the Party. Purkayastha thinks this was a specific step taken due to the exigencies of the situation in Russia after the revolution. Actually, the forming of factions with a Communist Party would destroy the integrity of the Party organization and disable its will to collective action. One has only to remember that in the last days of the CPSU, under the Gorbachevian leadership, factions were permitted and this contributed to hastening the disintegration of the Soviet party.

It is not possible for a Party leadership to disregard the opinion of the ‘Party as a whole’. Contrary to that, it is only when there is no democratic centralism, or a gross violation of it, that such a thing can happen. How is the opinion of the Party expressed but through the views put forward by the Party committees at all levels? If a majority of the state committees give a different opinion, can the Central Committee disregard their views in our Party? Or, can the Polit Bureau disregard the views of the majority in the Central Committee?

### *2. Stifles Inner-Party Democracy*

The second argument is that democratic centralism, as an organizational principle, inherently leads to centralism and ends up curtailing democracy; that the rule that lower committees should



accept the decision of the higher committee leads to lopsidedness and over-centralisation. This stifles democratic expression of views and suppresses dissent.

This is a more substantive criticism. Especially in view of the experience of many Communist parties both ruling and non-ruling. Leading bodies such as the Polit Bureau, Central Committee or State Committees can exercise untrammelled rights by selectively invoking those provisions of democratic centralism which give them the last word. Bureaucratic centralism or over-centralism can be cited in many instances when inner-Party democracy and the principles of democratic centralism are violated. But democratic centralism should be seen comprehensively, not just as something which embodies the centralizing principle.

Taken together the set of principles which embody democratic centralism make it more democratic in practice than many parties which practice, in theory, democracy only. It is important to see not just the form but the content of the democracy practiced by parties.

The Leninist concept of Party organisation does not regiment or exclude vigorous inner-Party debates and discussions on both theory and practice. What it offers is the widest scope for debate and discussions while demanding the unity of action on a centralised political line. As Lenin put it:

In the heat of the battle, when the proletarian army is straining every nerve, any criticism whatsoever cannot be permitted in its ranks. But before the call for action is issued, there should be the broadest and freest discussion and appraisal of the resolution, of its arguments and its various propositions.<sup>3</sup>

Democratic centralism is not a set of rigid dogmas. The actual norms and set of rules for the exercise of democratic centralism will find varying expressions in the parties of different countries and in different stages of the development of the same party. The other thing to remember is that democracy and centralism cannot be set within a fixed ratio for all times. It will depend on the concrete circumstances in each country, on the political situation, on the strength of the party, the political level of its party members and the confidence that the ranks have on the leadership.

Trotsky, who disagreed with Lenin on many issues, defending

## THE MARXIST

the principles of democratic centralism stated:

When the problem is political action, centralism subordinates democracy to itself. Democracy again asserts its rights when the party feels the need to examine critically its own actions. The equilibrium between democracy and centralism establishes itself in the actual struggle, at moments it is violated and then again reestablished.

Similarly, democracy is practiced, before the conference when the political line is being formulated. Centralism comes in when the line is being implemented.

The CPI (M) has sought to learn from the experience of the Communist Parties, especially those which successfully led revolutions. Some of these parties fell prey to violating the principles of democratic centralism. The cult of a leader and the extreme centralism built around him, led to the abandonment of inner-Party democracy.

The CPI (M) was not affected by this deviation at any time in its history. The collective functioning of the leadership and the leading bodies has prevented such a deviation.

It is for our Party to decide to practice democratic centralism as a party of the working class. This will not hinder broader Left consolidation. Just as we cannot compel any other Left party to follow democratic centralism, so also no other Left force can object to our internal organisational principle.

Even when we have a multi-party system in the period of transition to socialism and thereafter, it will be necessary for the Communist Party to adhere to democratic centralism. In fact, this will be a key instrument which will help the Party to compete effectively against other currents and forces to win over more sections of the working people.

As far as Ashok Mitra is concerned, he does not reject democratic centralism *per se*.<sup>4</sup> He criticises its practice in the CPI (M) in West Bengal where, according to him, 'there is an excess of centralism with not even a wee bit of democracy'. This led to the Party getting cut off from the people.

On earlier occasions, Ashok Mitra had strongly criticised the CPI (M) and the Left Front government's policy of industrialisation and the land acquisition measures. According to him, the implementation

of neo-liberal policies was responsible for the Party's alienation from the people.

Even if this assumption is taken to be true, then it is not the distorted practice of democratic centralism and over centralism which is to blame. In fact, Ashok Mitra has said elsewhere that it is the dedicated and disciplined cadres of the CPI (M) who constitute the backbone of the movement in West Bengal. The setback suffered in West Bengal has its causes in the political, organisational and governmental plane. The Party's review of the Lok Sabha elections have pinpointed the reasons and the shortcomings. But the excess of centralism is not the real cause.

### *3. Theory and Praxis under Democratic Centralism*

Prabhat Patnaik has criticised the use of democratic centralism on the following basis. Theory has been seen as a closed system. The prevailing view has been that Marxist theory developed by Marx, Engels and Lenin is to be adapted and interpreted only.

Contrary to this, Marxist theory can develop only if it is open and engages with non-Marxist mainstream theoretical developments. Theory is the preserve of the leadership and its application is for the ranks. This is the pattern fostered by, or, suited to democratic centralism.

Free scientific discussion is like oxygen for a revolutionary party; without such discussion it cannot survive. But such free discussion in turn requires not just complete intellectual freedom, but also the existence of a multiplicity of opinions (which in turn entails a multiplicity of political parties) and a redefinition of the concept of 'democratic centralism' as the organising principle of a revolutionary party.<sup>5</sup>

Patnaik is right in pointing out that theory is not a closed system which only needs interpretation and application. Marxist theory has to constantly grow and update itself, for which it needs to be open and engage with new ideas, opposing ideologies and new circumstances. He is also right that there has been a dogmatic understanding of theory in the past.

But to link this flawed understanding of theory with the principles of democratic centralism is not correct. The failure to discuss

## THE MARXIST

theoretical issues and for creatively developing theory lies in the dogmatic understanding of theory being a 'closed system' as Patnaik himself points out and the cause of it cannot be ascribed to democratic centralism. There can be debates on theory and theoretical explorations within the framework of democratic centralism.

As Lukacs pointed out, organization is a form of mediation between theory and practice.<sup>6</sup> While different theoretical interpretations and views can be aired and argued, when it comes to practice, it has to assume an organizational form. It is here that the consequences of theory get clarified and tested. While disparate theoretical views can be there in discussions, when it comes to action through organization, there has to be a conclusion and direction to act upon. Whether a theory is correct, or a political-tactical decision right, can be judged by experience and the circumstances in which such a line of action was decided. Democratic centralism does not impede or reject such reviews and learning from one's practice. In fact, it provides the framework to do so in a manner by which the Party maintains its political coherence, its ideological continuity and tactical flexibility.

While a whole range of theory needs free discussion and constant reexamination, this cannot be extended to areas where a political line or conclusion is drawn after a discussion. There can be no 'multiplicity of opinions' when the Party has to act on the basis of its decisions and line. The question of discipline arises not for suppressing theoretical discussions but for ensuring that the Party acts with a single purpose.

### *4. Social Democratic Trends Result in Challenging Democratic Centralism*

The link between the trend towards reformist politics of the social democratic variety and the necessity to abandon democratic centralism is well established. This is explicitly seen in Javeed Alam's attack on democratic centralism.<sup>7</sup> His endorsement of liberal democracy, his unbalanced view of the working class gains under bourgeois democracy and his incorrect exposition of Lenin's views on bourgeois democracy are all symptoms of a moving away from the Marxist standpoint. Taking off from a correct point about the rights wrested by the organized working class movement in the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, Alam goes overboard in declaring

that 'A whole new schedule of rights (for the working class) came about and became engrained.' He also characterises the gains secured by the working class as 'simultaneously a shrinking of the prerogatives of the bourgeoisie.'

Alam completely ignores the erosion of these gains of the working class and the dismantling of their 'engrained' rights that took place under the neo-liberal dispensation of the 1980s in Britain and the US and then spread to the whole of Europe. Even the right to strike and collective bargaining were eroded. The only right under liberal democracy which endures is the right to vote, under adult franchise.

Alam exaggerates the emancipatory content of democracy under capitalism and underplays its class nature. Liberal democracy posits democratic and equal rights for citizens and then proceeds to limit and negate this by separating it from the economic sphere. Democracy has to subserve the market and capital and this assumes a formal character.

Javeed Alam disagrees with the political positions of the CPI (M). He has bemoaned the fact that the CPI (M) leadership had not found the wisdom to join bourgeois-led governments at the Centre in the past and attribute such wrong political understanding and tactics to the iron hand and blind discipline imposed by democratic centralism on the Party!

Such a wrong type of criticism is made by others too. If a tactical line is considered wrong, it is then attributed to the functioning of democratic centralism, or its distorted way of working. For instance, if the political step taken to withdraw support to the UPA government in July 2008 was a mistake, then it is attributed to the undemocratic command system in vogue. Similarly, the electoral setback in West Bengal is blamed on the bureaucratic leadership which is cut off from the views of the rank and file.

The CPI (M), within the framework of democratic centralism, has vigorous inner-Party discussions and debates on tactics and policy matters. For instance, in 1996, on the question of joining the Government at the Centre both the majority and minority views were thoroughly discussed in the Central Committee. The decision was further reviewed in the 16<sup>th</sup> Party Congress and the issue clinched. This is the method of a Communist Party. Those who disagree with the political and ideological positions cannot claim that it is

## THE MARXIST

democratic centralism that is responsible for decisions they do not like. They are chary of accepting the principle that the minority should accept the majority decision and implement it. But to deduce from this, that democratic centralism stifles criticism and dissenting views is unwarranted.

*To sum up:*

Democratic centralism should not be seen as a set of dogmas regarding organization. The following facts regarding democratic centralism should be kept in mind:

1. For a party which sets out a strategy for a revolution and bases its tactics on such a revolutionary strategy, the principle of democratic centralism is essential for its organisation.
2. Wrong ideological understanding and incorrect strategy and tactics can adversely affect the organization. Eventually, the political-ideological deviations and wrong trends can erode the practice of democratic centralism itself.
3. Democratic centralism is the organizational principle for a Party based on the Marxist outlook. But there cannot be one single formula of democratic centralism for all times and all parties. They will vary according to conditions in which parties are working and the practice may vary during different periods of a single party.
4. There can be no fixed ratio of centralism and democracy in democratic centralism. When the party is formulating its policies, at the time of conferences etc., there will be democracy in action, free discussions within the party forums. Once a call for action is given, the aspect of centralism will predominate. When the party subjects its actions to self-critical review, democracy will assert itself again.
5. The practice of democratic centralism is not determined by the formal principles and rules. It depends on the ideological political level of the Party members, the concrete conditions and political situation in a country, the authority of the leadership and the experience gained in building the organization through struggles and tackling inner-Party contradictions.

III

*Experience in India*

The practice of democratic centralism in the Party has gone through a number of stages. In the early stages, the fledgling Communist Party saw itself as part of the contingent of the Communist International. The approach was that on matters of theory and political line, the CI word was final. This is the attitude which lingered on in the united Party, where the views of the CPSU were given weightage. This was an approach which stunted the development of theory and working out correct strategy and tactics. In the second stage, after independence, problems of revisionism and sectarianism had their impact on the organizational plane. But by and large, the practice of inner Party democracy was not negated.

After the formation of the CPI (M), there was a critical review of the organizational practice in the united party. The document 'Tasks on Party Organisation' was an outcome of this and provided the basis for building and running the organization of the Party. A pertinent point made by the document was that revisionism attacked the principle of democratic centralism: 'Democratic Centralism, the highest principle and the kernel of a Marxist-Leninist party was subjected to furious assaults and seriously undermined.'

How has the practice of democratic centralism shaped up in our Party? Is it a mechanical copying of how democratic centralism was practiced by the Russian party or any other party?

In the Salkia Plenum, the CPI (M) called for the development of a mass revolutionary party. This has to be built up on the basis of the principles of democratic centralism. Without democratic centralism, only a mass party can exist. Despite the shortcomings and limitations in the proper exercise of democratic centralism, it is these principles embodied in the Party Constitution, which has enabled the Party committees to develop the mass base of the Party and recruit tens of thousands of Party members who are willing to work under the discipline of the Party. No other party in India can claim to have as extensive discussions and inner-Party democracy as the CPI (M). This has been possible not in spite of democratic centralism but because of it being exercised.

## THE MARXIST

The CPI (M) is working in a parliamentary democracy ever since its inception. It is not only in parliament and legislatures, it is running states governments and also works extensively in local bodies in some states. The practice of democratic centralism has taken this experience into account. How to guide thousands of party members in these institutions and local self-governments has been encompassed within the broad framework of democratic centralism.

The Party is working in vastly varied conditions in the various states. On the basis of a centralized political line, there is a considerable amount of autonomy for the state committees to work out concrete tactics. Democratic centralism does not mean uniformity in tactics in developing the mass movements and the mass organizations.

The Party is in touch with the people not only through mass organizations but is accountable to them through its representatives in elected bodies at various levels. It is not possible to work in these forums only with a centralized line. It is by the democratic involvement of the Party cadres and members that mass politics and the work in these multifarious bodies can be conducted.

### *Correctives Applied*

The CPI (M) reviewed the experience of the exercise of democratic centralism after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the 14<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Party in 1992, the distortions in democratic centralism practiced in the Soviet Union and some of the other socialist countries were noted. Overcentralisation, bureaucratism and the lack of inner-Party democracy prevailed.

One of the mistakes made at the level of theory and practice was the application of the principle of democratic centralism to the State structure of the Soviet Union. Democratic centralism became the guiding principle for the Soviet State and not just of the Communist Party. This was one of the factors which deformed socialist democracy.

The CPI (M) took up some corrective measures. Some of them are as follows:

(i) Democratic centralism is the organising principle of the Party and cannot be applied to the State. In the Programme adopted by the CPI (M) in 1964 it was stated that the People's Democratic State would be



based on the principle of democratic centralism. In the updating of the Programme in 2000, this was dropped.

(ii) In order to strengthen inner-Party democracy, certain steps were taken. It was decided that higher committees should not propose the name of the secretary of the next lower committee at the time of the conference. Panels for new committees were already being prepared by the concerned outgoing committees.

(iii) Ensure election by secret ballot, if there is a contest.

(iv) The Central Control Commission should be elected directly by the Party Congress and not be a commission of the Central Committee. The Constitution was amended for this purpose.

(v) To ensure democratic functioning of the mass organisations, all elected posts/committees should not be decided by the concerned Party committee.

In this connection, it should be pointed out that Javeed Alam has wrongly depicted the procedures for election to Party committees. He has stated that panels of members are proposed by the higher committees to the lower bodies. This is not so. The panel is prepared by the outgoing committee at the conference and not by the higher committee. He further states that elections are by show of hands. This is also incorrect. If there are any names proposed outside the panel and there is a contest, there has to be an election by secret ballot. If there are no alternative names to the panel proposed, then voting is by show of hands. Here delegates can vote against or abstain.

The proper exercise of democratic centralism depends crucially on the political-ideological level of the Party members. Paucity in this level can result in limiting democratic involvement in discussions and policy making. The other violations of democratic centralism exist because of organizational problems like factionalism, lack of collective functioning, wrong methods of leadership at various levels, etc. Correcting and eliminating such trends is part of the struggle to build the Party on correct political organizational lines. The rectification campaign now being undertaken in the Party is dealing with the issues related to strengthening democratic centralism and correcting the violations of this principle.

Functioning in a multiparty system under parliamentary democracy, the CPI (M) functions on the basis of democratic

## THE MARXIST

centralism because it is based on the revolutionary perspective that people's democracy will be a higher form of democracy than bourgeois democracy. That can be accomplished only by putting an end to the bourgeois-landlord rule.

If democratic centralism is violated and not practiced properly by the CPI (M), then its advance as a party leading the working class and working people towards social transformation gets thwarted. It is thus incumbent on the Party to seriously eliminate all distortions and malfunctioning of democratic centralism within the Party.

Lenin had remarked that politics cannot be mechanically separated from organization. The critics of democratic centralism and those asking the CPI (M) to do away with democratic centralism are wittingly or unwittingly asking for a change in the Party's basic character and strategy. For the CPI (M), the choice is stark: no mass revolutionary party without democratic centralism. The struggle the Party has to constantly engage in is to inculcate the true essence and spirit of democratic centralism within the entire Party.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Georg Lukacs, *Lenin: A Study of his writing and thought*, New Left Books, 1970.

<sup>2</sup> Prabir Purkayastha, 'The 2009 elections and the challenges from the Left', *The Journal*, Vol. I, August 15, 2010, Centre for Policy Analysis.

<sup>3</sup> V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 10, p. 381.

<sup>4</sup> AM, 'The State of the CPI (M) in West Bengal', *Economic and Political Weekly*, July 25, 2009

<sup>5</sup> Prabhat Patnaik, 'Re-Envisioning Socialism', *Economic and Political Weekly*, November 3, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Georg Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*, Merlin Press, 1971.

<sup>7</sup> Javeed Alam, 'Can Democratic Centralism Be Conducive to Democracy?', *Economic and Political Weekly*, September 19, 2009.