Debate in the Anti-war Movement

AN INTENSE DEBATE is going on among a section of the activists in the anti-war movement. A notable feature of this debate is that it is confined to those activists who regard themselves as revolutionaries. The vast number of followers and supporters of the anti-war movement remain untouched by it. The debate centres around the aims and main slogans of the Moratorium movement. But in fact underlying it are differing concepts about the nature of the anti-war movement and about the movement for social change.

One group argues that as the Australian anti-war movement is part of the world-wide struggle against imperialism it ought to proclaim clear-cut anti-imperialist aims and that the movement should be rallied under an anti-US imperialist slogan. This group claims that anything less is an unprincipled concession to liberal and pacifist views of the war and betrayal of the whole movement. The people who express these views claim that they occupy the most “revolutionary” and most “advanced” position. They are scornful of all those who contest this view, describing them as weak, revisionist, even as “objectively serving the interests of US imperialism”.

At a time when many people, and particularly young people, are becoming radicalised as a result of continuing war in Indo-China, when many of them come to recognise the imperialist nature of this war and are beginning to question the society which makes such wars possible, the seemingly simple and direct solutions offered by these “instant” revolutionaries have a certain initial attraction. They seem to offer a quick, clear-cut, straightforward recipe for revolution. Those who are new to the revolutionary movement who have little or no contact with the working class movement and have not seriously studied the experiences of revolution can be attracted to the simple, revolutionary catch-phrase which is so often a substitute for a serious marxist analysis and for the complex task of elaborating a revolutionary strategy and tactics. Few have been more scornful of revolutionary phrase-mongering than Lenin who talked about “the revolutionary phrase” that “might ruin our revolution”. “The slogans are superb, alluring, intoxicating, but there are no grounds for them, such is the nature of the revolutionary phrase.” Lenin, February 1918.

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All revolutionaries, new and old, need to seriously examine the issues involved in that debate and what underlies them. The anti-war movement is an extra-parliamentary mass movement which includes people with a great diversity of views and attitudes and independent of any political party. It is a voluntary coalition of differing forces. The common factor is the opposition to the war in Vietnam. It includes both supporters and opponents of the present social system. It includes revolutionaries, reformists, pacifists, humanitarians, liberals and a lot of people who don't fit into any of these categories.

People have been aroused, and continue to be aroused by the war in Vietnam. Some are aroused by the heroism of the Vietnamese people, others by the cruelty and barbarism, by the torture and destruction as the rulers of a big nation try to impose their will on a small nation. Many people have been aroused on humanitarian grounds, some have gone further to a criticism of the system that produced the Vietnam war and keeps it going. Some have come to see the hypocrisy of our own system, the lies of our rulers, the distortions and biased propaganda of our mass media and the manipulation of our society. But there are many others who think the war is unwise — a mistake, and those who are as yet only vaguely opposed to the war. There are people here, as in the United States, who support our social system but who are opposed to the war because it is dividing our society and alienating some of the young, and making enemies for us among the people in Asia.

In short, people are drawn into this movement for a great variety of reasons, with different attitudes and different levels of understanding. This is the inevitable nature of a mass movement of this character. This is quite different from a political party of likeminded people with an all-embracing political program. Do we support such a broad movement operating on the basis that there is no exclusion of any group opposed to the war in Vietnam and no domination of any one group or trend — or do we believe that the movement should be confined to revolutionaries only (perhaps only those of the "right" brand)?

Is that what some people want? If so, let them openly say so. We don’t agree with this. We think it is a good thing that all the forces genuinely opposed to the war in Vietnam should combine in a common effort to arouse our people, many of whom are still apathetic, in order to reach the stage where we can enforce our demands on the rulers of our country. We aim for the movement to reach such a level that it becomes too difficult, too costly for our rulers to continue the present policies. That is
why we believe that to impose anti-imperialist aims on the whole movement would limit and narrow the movement and would restrict its ability to grow and attract new forces.

This is quite different from the question of the role that revolutionaries should play inside the broad movement. Revolutionaries have the responsibility to present their own views to explain and win support for their anti-imperialist analysis and demands, that is to carry out effective revolutionary work.

It is precisely in conditions where the movement opens its doors widely to people who want to do something about the war in Vietnam, when it invites people to join it, that the most favourable conditions for the propagation of revolutionary ideas are created. When people get involved in the movement, when they are active, that is when they want to learn new things, that is when they begin to ask questions about the nature of the war in Vietnam, our government’s policy and the nature of our society. Revolutionaries should welcome these favourable conditions for teaching these activists more about the role of imperialism and the nature of our society. This is the way revolutionaries should act. This is the way in which the successful revolutionaries of Russia and China acted.

Imposing anti-imperialist aims on the Moratorium movement would limit its appeal and would in fact seriously reduce the scope for effective revolutionary mass work in the anti-war movement. It would put up an unnecessary barrier to the entry of people into the movement. It would in fact demand of people that they should understand before they join the movement, that the war in Vietnam is a product of imperialism — instead of teaching them when they are in the movement. Despite the militant-sounding posture, this attitude in fact reduces the scope for the revolutionaries to effectively explain the issues in this war and to teach people what lies behind it and about the nature of our social system.

The main slogan of the movement at this stage should be a slogan that leads the whole movement forward. It must be effective, it should concentrate on the enemy’s weakest spot. It must be a slogan that the enemy cannot absorb, integrate or render harmless. It must be a slogan that can rally people into action, that can attract new forces. To do all this it must be concrete and seem capable of realisation. To be effective a slogan must be logical, sensible, yet strike at the system.

At this stage, the demand for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of the total US and allied military presence from Indo-China is such a demand. It is a slogan that is quite clear, and can be understood by everybody. It is a concrete demand
on our government that all Australian troops, naval and air forces with all their military equipment be immediately withdrawn from Indo-China. Yet it strikes at the very nerve centre of our enemy. A total ending of allied military presence would lead to a victory of the people of Indo-China. It is not a slogan that can be absorbed. It has nothing in common with Nixon’s phoney “withdrawal” of some US troops.

In Russia in 1917 the slogan “Peace, Land and Bread” was of the same nature: concrete, sensible, yet it struck at the heart of the system, it could not be absorbed. Compare this to the “Smash Imperialism” slogan! How does one smash imperialism in Australia at this moment? How does one gain mass support for such a generalised call? What are people asked to do? On the face of it the “Smash Imperialism” slogan appears far more revolutionary than the “Peace, Land and Bread” or the “All Power to the Soviets” slogans that led the masses into the October Revolution.

What makes this so serious is its effect on the position of the Australian workers. It is generally agreed that the whole anti-war movement must direct its activities towards raising working class consciousness and activities in opposition to the war in Vietnam. Yet we know about the difficulties of mobilising the workers and overcoming existing apathy. Does anybody really imagine that slogans such as “Smash Imperialism” make this task easier? By contrast the slogan “Stop Work to Stop the War” is an example of the type of slogan that is concrete, realistic, yet effective, and that can rally mass support.

It is not out of place to ask that in addition to noting the experiences of the Russian and Chinese revolutions on the matter of revolutionary slogans, some attention be paid to the views of the people who are doing the fighting in Vietnam. Mme. Nguyen Thi Binh, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Head of the Delegation of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam to the Paris Conference on Vietnam, had this to say in her message to the Anti-War Conference:

... we urgently appeal to all peace and justice-loving people throughout the world and to the eminent delegates to this National Anti-war Conference to undertake urgent action in demanding that the United States immediately end their aggression and adventurous war activities:

Rapidly withdraw their troops and those of other foreign countries in their camp from South Vietnam and Indochina so as to enable the South Vietnamese, Laotian and Cambodian people to decide their own affairs without foreign interference:

That Australian troops should be withdrawn from South Vietnam in the common interests of the Australian and Vietnamese peoples and in the interests of friendship between our two peoples.
Advanced Action

Similar differences are apparent in an evaluation of the role of “advanced actions”. We believe that advanced actions play a vital role in the anti-war movement. A vanguard, which will always be a small minority, is essential to inspire and to advance the whole movement, to deepen the understanding of all participants and supporters. The seamen refusing to sail the Jeparit or the inspiring effort of the draft resisters are outstanding examples. Some advanced actions are essential. The broad movement on its own, without a vanguard, can be absorbed or turned into safe channels. But the vanguard must not be isolated. This is always the aim of the ruling class, of the opponents of the anti-war movement. Advanced action must always be connected with and part of mass activities. It can never be a substitute for mass action. The idea, propagated by some, that all advanced actions are positive, irrespective of conditions or of their effect on the broad movement is a simplistic and dangerous view.

The differences on tactics, slogans and on the direction of the movement can be traced back and understood in terms of differences about the objectives of the movement. We Communists have a dual or two-fold objective which we state openly and pursue within the movement.

1. To end this war, to stop the aggression, for the right of the Vietnamese people for independence and to determine their own future.

The Vietnam war is pursued by the American imperialists to teach the people of Asia and South America a stern lesson — not to rise in revolt against their foreign oppressors. They want to demonstrate to all oppressed people that they can’t succeed in their revolt. That is why the Americans are hanging on so tenaciously despite their difficulties at home and the problems the Vietnam war has created for the American rulers. Conversely, a victory for the Vietnamese people and a defeat for the aggressor would have repercussions everywhere. It would encourage the people of Asia and South America to fight against foreign domination and oppression. The Americans understand this quite well. This is the element of truth in the notorious “domino” theory.

We share the aim of ending the war with others who pursue it solely for humanitarian reasons, or even because they believe it to be a wrong or unwise policy. At the same time we should recognise that in fact the achievement of this aim — to force our rulers to end this war — would be an enormous contribution to the world-wide movement for social change.
It should be clear to all activists in Australia this means above all to involve those sections of the working class — by far the majority — who are at present largely apathetic and passive about the war in Vietnam. Without that the movement cannot succeed in forcing an end to the war.

2. Our second aim — is to teach as many people as possible the real causes of the war.

These, we believe, lie in the nature of our social system, in the nature of imperialism. The war is not a “mistake”, but the product of a social system that has long outlived its usefulness, and in trying to maintain itself this system is threatening us all with destruction. It is only if this can be convincingly demonstrated to people who have been drawn into the movement that such wars can be prevented in the future — in such places as New Guinea.

Our openly stated aim is to advance the movement for ending the existing social system, as well as the movement to end the war in Vietnam. We have both aims, some in the movement have not. Some ignore the need to build a wide movement to end the war, some even sneer at such an aim and regard it as a sell-out. In doing so they are rejecting the pleas of the Vietnamese people who are at present in the vanguard of the struggle against imperialism.

For all its militant phraseology this attitude does not assist the development of revolution throughout the world. It ignores the lessons of both Russian and Chinese revolutions which have demonstrated the need for alliances to achieve specific aims within the revolutionary process.

If this attitude were to predominate it would seriously reduce the effectiveness of the movement for fundamental social change in our country. There is a vast difference between the attitude and level of understanding of the activists, who are a relatively small group, and that of the masses of supporters and followers of the anti-war movement. Because of this the problems among the activists are different from those of the movement as a whole. In the broad movement the main problem is apathy, conservatism, lack of concern and involvement and passivity. Among the activists however frustration and “super” left revolutionary phrase-making are the main concern. This trend, if not challenged, could seriously restrict the movement and prevent us from solving the main problem of the broad anti-war movement at this stage — overcoming apathy and involving the great body of the Australian working class against the war in Vietnam.