Arthur Rudkin comments on Bernie Taft’s article “After the Excitement: Eurocommunism at the Crossroads” which was published in ALR 86.

Arthur Rudkin

Beyond Simple One-to-One Alternatives

What peaceful, care-free lives we could all lead if every political problem could be solved by such simple, one-to-one alternatives as Bernie Taft presents in his article on Eurocommunism (ALR, No. 86)! And what an incredible load of ineffectual nuts the pre-Eurocommunists must have been if they really chose the alternatives Comrade Taft seems to attribute to them!

In fact, of course, despite the dismal record of the Comintern after Stalin was persuaded to annex it to the USSR as part of his personal estate, none of the four Internationals was set up with the object of imposing “any outside influence or pressure” on their national affiliates, but for purposes of consultation, co-operation and mutual aid. Why, indeed, must an international organisation curtail the “inalienable rights” of its affiliates, any more than a national organisation the “inalienable rights” of its local branches?

Does Eurocommunist rejection of internationalism mean that every small nation trying to build socialism must be prepared, if necessary, to face the combined military and economic might of the capitalist world unaided, lest international solidarity be interpreted as an attempt at “direction of the party by an outside body”?

Rather ironically, the Eurocommunists must thank Stalin for their “complete autonomy”. Dissolution of the Third International was his personal decision, announced at a press conference in Moscow, without consulting anyone. The first we knew of our “democratic” decision to be no longer part of an international movement was when we read about it in the capitalist press next morning.

Very probably, the general acquiescence in Stalin’s ukase, and attempts to justify it on “historical materialist” grounds, were due less to genuine conviction than to reluctance to start a public brawl with Stalin and the CPSU. The parties of the Comintern tried, whenever possible, to reach unanimous consensus, and avoid public debate — perhaps unwisely, as it tended to create the impression that divergent views were never given a fair hearing within the parties, either.

Despite distortions of democratic centralism by some parties, it was not invented to create “unlimited power for the leadership of the party”, but to ensure that democratic decisions, once arrived at, were put into effect, not everlastingly recommitted for further consideration, or stymied by obstinate opposition from disaffected minorities. Have the Eurocommunists really developed an equally effective but more democratic means of ensuring that they will not degenerate into mere loose confederations of debating societies, devoted to neither interpreting nor changing the world, but only talking about it?

Comrade Taft has surely been a leading member of the CPA long enough to remember that neither the CPA nor any other professed marxist party, except a few tiny terrorist splinter groups, ever advocated “insurrection and minority rule” as an intrinsically better way of achieving socialism than “winning majority support”. The point is, as Marx predicted long ago, that socialists have no need to initiate violence, even if they want it: the bourgeoisie can always be relied upon to fire the first shot. This has been confirmed historically time and time again, from the Paris Commune to the present day, as in, for instance, pre-war Italy, Germany, Austria and Spain, in Indonesia, Ghana, Korea, Viet Nam, Chile, Afghanistan, Nicaragua and Grenada, to mention only a few of the best known examples, and saying nothing of the many countries where there are no elections, or where socialist and other progressive parties are not allowed to contest them, like
the Philippines, East Timor and West Irian in our own region, or South Africa, where the last free elections gave communists an overwhelming majority of the popular vote, but only one seat in parliament, thanks to complexion-based suffrage.

What is the use of majority support for a broad alliance of "parties, movements and organisations" in countries like the USA and the UK, where the electoral system virtually bans effective representation for more than two parties, and the very existence of more than one progressive party splits the vote and renders continued minority reactionary rule almost inevitable.

No doubt the Eurocommunists are sincere in their determination not to try to establish Stalin-style dictatorships, but can they predict with equal confidence that their policies will not lead to more Pinchelet-style dictatorships? Do they really believe the bourgeoisie will agree never to use violence against them, if they undertake never to use violence to defend themselves?

The failure of the Eurocommunist parties to answer these and similar questions may account for their decline in popularity after promising beginnings, and for the failure of some communist parties with similar policies, such as those of Australia, the UK and Japan, to gain even temporary new support by their vigorously publicised denunciation of Stalinism.

Perhaps some older comrades forget that Stalin died before most people now living were even born. For many of the younger generation, Stalinism and anti-Stalinism must seem more like historical relics than sound main planks in the platform of popular political parties. The novelty has worn off the spectacle of communists fiercely denouncing nearly everything that once distinguished them from the reformist Labour and Social Democratic parties. By now, nearly everybody knows what the Eurocommunists and their allies are against, but many are not so clear about what they are for, and how they hope to achieve it.

In pre-Eurocommunist days, we could point to the amazing economic, industrial, social, cultural, scientific, medical and military successes of the Soviet Union as brilliant examples of what socialism can achieve, while stressing that adoption of a socialist economic system did not necessarily entail accepting the Soviet political system, and that its political shortcomings were due partly to its rather recent emergence from absolute monarchy and a predominantly peasant economy, partly to the need for strict internal discipline while surrounded by hostile powers poised to seize upon and exploit internal dissension for their own ends, as they did in Hungary, and tried to do in Czechoslovakia and Poland. Some people might even have considered some restriction of personal liberty a small price to pay for abolition of poverty, unemployment, homelessness, economic insecurity, and racism, the world's first and only completely free and universal health service, steadily rising living standards, and a genuine struggle for world peace, or even that the Soviet attitude to some dissident minorities would not be a bad swap for the "free world" practice of granting unrestricted freedom of speech — well, not terribly restricted — to dissenting majorities, with absolute freedom of the politicians not to take a blind bit of notice, as with the installation of Cruise and Pershing missiles in western Europe, uranium exports from Australia, and the annual baby seal massacre in Canada.

There may be flaws in this argument, but for 40 years it did inspire millions of people, not only to vote for communist candidates, but to put in enormous amounts of hard work and personal sacrifice to advance the communist cause.

Nowadays, in some countries, communist party members hardly dare hint that socialism ever had any positive achievements at all to its credit, lest they be suspected of whatever is the current jargon for Left Sectarian deviation from the Party Line. The cornerstone of communist propaganda in those countries thus tends to become breast-beating confessions that communist rule has always been an unmitigated disaster in the past, and fervent promises to do better in future. Though conceivably more logical than the old gospel, and undoubtedly less offensive to the bourgeois Establishment, this seems somehow strangely less inspiring; and, of course, it suffers the embarrassing defect, that the safest way to make sure the Eurocommunists keep their promise not to repeat the blunders of the Russian, Chinese and Polish communists, might seem to be not to vote for them, or support them, in any way.

Few people would argue that communists should return to their old quasi-religion, with Karl Marx in the role of Jesus Christ, and the General Secretary of the CPSU as the infallible Pope, but they do need a more convincing and inspiring alternative than they have yet put forward. I have hinted broadly enough what I think the alternative should be. I leave it to younger and more active comrades to work out the details.