The Dictatorship of the Proletariat and Soviet Democracy

The “dictatorship of the proletariat,” a phrase that had appeared somewhat sporadically in the writings of Marx and Engels, was to prove simultaneously troublesome and useful: troublesome because difficult to define, useful — for the Bolsheviks and their supporters — because of this very ambiguity. Kautsky’s observation that “Marx had unfortunately omitted to specify what he conceived this dictatorship to be” seems a considerable understatement given the importance that came to be attached, by a wide spectrum of Left opinion, to the correct interpretation of Marx’s legacy.

In everyday discourse in the years following the Great War, as now, dictatorship was the antithesis of democracy. Dictatorship meant absolute rule by a single person; to talk of the dictatorship of a class would therefore have seemed a little odd — and presumably metaphorical. No doubt the early exponents of the Bolshevik version of the
dictatorship of the proletariat, who contrasted it with the “dictatorship of the bourgeoisie,” did not imagine that the entire capitalist class directed day-to-day government. What they were trying to assert was that the economic, social, and cultural hegemony of the bourgeoisie distorted or negated formal political equality, making democracy, actual or potential, a delusion in capitalist countries.

Clearly, the fact that Robert Williams used the phrase at the Leeds Convention of June 1917 shows that the notion of a dictatorship of the proletariat was not unknown on the British Left before the Bolshevik takeover in Russia later that year. But it was not something that had featured prominently in pre-1917 socialist discourse in Britain, at least not in most of the socialist press. On at least one of the rare occasions when the phrase did appear, the context was derogatory. In 1913, writing in *Justice*, J. Hunter Watts, a prominent member of the BSP, used it to attack syndicalism, which he saw as “a recrudescence of the theory of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat which may be traced to Robespierre, and which deluded Marx when he stated that the Paris Commune would ‘serve as a lever’ to overthrow capitalism.” Significantly, perhaps, this was the view of a Hyndmanite who would be part of the pro-war and anti-Bolshevik NSP a few years later.

When use of the phrase subsequently became widespread — obligatory in some Left circles — there was a great deal more agreement that this dictatorship was both desirable and necessary than there was agreement about the precise meaning of the phrase. Those attracted to the Bolshevik cause by the idea that the soviets represented a “higher” form of democracy were to have great difficulties in reconciling this vision with the idea of dictatorship — unless “dictatorship” simply referred to the replacement of bourgeois socio-economic hegemony with that of the working class. The apparent democratic superiority of the soviets was a key element in the appeal of the Bolshevik cause. If the “dictatorship” of the proletariat was understood merely as a rather extravagantly vivid way of characterizing an uncompromising and unremitting commitment to achieving socialism by means of a system of soviets, the use of the term might be acceptable. But if it meant “real”
dictatorship in any shape or form, that was obviously going to be much more difficult to reconcile with the notion of soviet democracy.

Though much more was heard of it after the Bolsheviks came to power, the phrase began to be mooted at least occasionally in the months prior to October 1917. Apart from Robert Williams at the Leeds Convention, another early advocate of the dictatorship of the proletariat was the future leader of the ILP’s Left Wing and later Communist MP, J.T. Walton Newbold. In a front-page article in The Call in July 1917, titled simply “The Dictatorship of the Proletariat,” his emphasis was on the direct role of the working class. “Through the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils or through some other medium, now or in the not far distant future,” he wrote, the working class was going “to make an end not only to the capitalist system of industry, but also the capitalist system of social organisation known as the State, and of the capitalist system of ideas, education, and in fact the capitalist system of civilisation. It is going to create one of its own — that of Social-Democracy.” A fortnight later, in a piece titled “Forging the Weapon,” Newbold referred to “the conquest of absolute power, the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.”

If the “dictatorship of the proletariat” and the “soviet system” were not simply two ways of saying the same thing, then the difference was that the soviet system constituted the means, or the “medium,” to use Newbold’s word — one means (or medium) among others theoretically possible, but unspecified, to the desired end. As we have seen earlier, the exclusion of all but “workers” from participation in the soviet system was quite widely seen as unproblematic since socialism meant the abolition of classes. Therefore, everyone would quickly acquire proletarian status — unless they perversely refused to accept it — in what might be called the doctrine of voluntary exclusion. Ultimately, the proletariat would vanish, along with all other classes in a classless society.

The notion of voluntary exclusion is well illustrated in a piece by W.N. Ewer, which appeared in the Workers’ Dreadnought in August 1918. Ewer commented on

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the queer notion of some Socialists that the “dictatorship of the proletariat” is a bad thing and that all classes should be on an equality in the new society. Surely the abolition of the other classes by their absorption [sic] into the workers is precisely the first object of a socialist revolution and surely while they persist in maintaining a separate existence they can scarcely be accepted as part of Socialist society. The amiable folk who want to see a capitalist and rentier class preserved and protected by a Socialist Regime have scarcely grasped the elements of the matter.\footnote{4}

Similarly, in the summer of 1919, when the Workers’ Socialist Federation declared itself, briefly, to be the “Communist Party,” it issued a manifesto that interpreted the dictatorship of the proletariat in precisely this way: “We recognise that the dictatorship of the proletariat, which is the restriction of political power to those who live by their work and not upon accumulated wealth, or by employing others for their private gain, is necessary for the success of the workers’ revolution.”\footnote{5} Earlier, in “A Soviet Republic for Britain,” The Socialist had anticipated a system in which “each adult member of the Co-operative Commonwealth functions as a co-controller of its society and the co-worker of its industries.” In more general terms, “the control of the Commonwealth is by the democratic vote of its adult members.”\footnote{6}

The voluntary exclusion argument was not confined to Bolshevik sympathizers in Britain. For example, in May 1919, the Dreadnought published an article by Albert Lantos, described as “a Soviet Official in Budapest,” that defended the soviet system. According to Lantos, capitalists had no rights. But they could easily acquire political rights by engaging in “fruitful labour,” he insisted.\footnote{7} Similarly, later in the year, a small item in The Call reported the following statement of I.A. Martens, the Russian Soviet representative in the United States, under the heading “The Dictatorship of the Proletariat.” Soviet Russia’s government, Martens said,
the Council of People’s Commissaires, is a Government controlled by and responsible to all such members of the population of Russia as are willing to perform useful work, physical or mental. Those who, while not unable to work, deliberately refuse to exercise their productive abilities, choosing to live on the fruits of the labour of other people, are eliminated from participation in the control of my Government.⁸

The objection to “bourgeois democracy” was that the economic power of the capitalists, exercised in a myriad of social, cultural, and political settings as well as in purely economic ways, would always determine the policies pursued by governments, no matter how democratically elected. The result was the de facto “dictatorship of the bourgeoisie,” a situation that was unavoidable within the framework of “bourgeois democracy.” As The Socialist quoted Zinoviev as putting it: “Soviets signify the Dictatorship of the Proletariat: the National Assembly signifies the Dictatorship of the Bourgeoisie.”⁹ The “dictatorship of the proletariat,” then, surely meant the transfer of economic power to the working class. In Russia, this is what soviet democracy seemed to be implementing. But given that the “dictatorship of the bourgeoisie” was compatible with an (apparently) democratic state, one featuring broad freedom of expression and political action, did this not mean that such freedoms would, or at least could, also co-exist with the “dictatorship of the proletariat?”

It was not that “harder,” more uncompromising versions of the dictatorship of the proletariat were unknown — or even that they were confined to those who disapproved of them. As early as April 1918, The Call reported on a speech by Lenin to the All-Russian Congress of Soviets in which he claimed that “Soviet Government” had profited from the experience of the Paris Commune by constituting itself “exclusively on the authority of the workers and poorer peasants to the exclusion of capitalists and Imperialists.” Lenin reportedly went on to say that “during the protracted period of transition . . . the proletariat must exercise a dictatorship” and to claim that “never in history have the questions at issue in the struggle between classes
been solved in any other way than by violent methods.” In fact, the
paper declared, “when it was a question of suppressing the exploit-
ers in the interests of the exploited classes, he frankly was all for
violence.”

But most homegrown Bolsheviks preferred to put a great deal
less emphasis on the use of force and to stress instead the democratic
nature of the soviets. In “Dictatorship and Democracy,” published in
The Call in September 1918, “W.A.M.M.” (another of Theodore Roth-
stein’s pseudonyms) spoke of the way the Paris Commune had been
supported by socialists and “even sections of bourgeois radicals”—
the Positivists were later mentioned. He contrasted this situation with
the current state of affairs, in which

the official Socialist parties almost everywhere are vying with the
capitalists in heaping calumnies and curses on the Socialist regime in
Russia, and what may be called the centre parties, the official minori-
ties, who abstain from joining in that infamous sport, think it necessary,
each time they mention the Bolsheviks, to add apologetically “of course,
we do not approve of everything they do.” Traitors to the one side, faint-

Kautsky, he continued, regarded as democratic the “couponocracy
of France, the plutocracy of England — in the latter moreover, mil-
ions were at that time still excluded from the franchise.” And yet,
he complained, “the Soviet regime which has realised the rule of
the labouring classes, which has placed the machinery of govern-
ment directly in the hands of 15,000,000 industrial workers and
80,000,000 peasants, and only excluded from all participation in the
government a few million intellectual saboteurs of the Revolution and
capitalist reactionaries of all kinds, as a temporary measure during
the period of armed conflict and pending the complete realisation of
Socialism and the abolition of all classes” was, according to Kautsky,
“tyrannical.” “Socialism is certainly Democracy,” W.A.M.M. ended,
“but the way to it lies through Revolution and Revolution means
fight.”
This “fight” was a great deal more ambiguous and abstract-sounding than Lenin’s “violence.” The same notion of a road to democracy via temporary dictatorship was implicit in the very title of Klara Zetkin’s “Through Dictatorship to Democracy,” which appeared in *The Socialist* late in 1919. Critics of the Bolsheviks seemed to forget, she asserted, that the disqualifications from the soviet franchise were “merely provisional” and would be enforced only “for the period during which the dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry must persist.”

Comparisons with authoritarian behaviour by “bourgeois” governments, to the advantage of Bolshevik Russia, were often made. Dora Montefiore reminded readers of *The Call* that the declaration of war in 1914 had triggered a “capitalist revolution,” in which bank depositors were compelled to accept “scraps of paper,” and that the government had gone on to seize transport and other undertakings and to introduce both the ultra-restrictive Defence of the Realm Act and conscription:

The law regulating the duration of a Parliament was arbitrarily put on one side, and all these acts of violence were carried out by a Government which had no mandate from the Parliament; so that the Government of the United Kingdom has, for the last few years, been virtually a Dictatorship and workers organised for a revolution have an object lesson of how the thing may be done.

At the end of four years of peace from the clash of militarism we should with the aid of a temporary revolutionary Dictatorship of the People (such as we have been undergoing for four years at the hands of the capitalist-militarists) have evolved a working form of socialisation of the means of life: and should, with the aid of International Socialists all over the world, have replaced the competitive struggle of capitalism by the human co-operation of Socialism.

As we saw earlier, Lenin tended to place much more emphasis on dictatorship in the conventional sense and on the use of violence, but those who wished to see the “dictatorship of the proletariat” as little
more than a poetic way of characterizing soviet democracy could still draw comfort from at least some of his statements that appeared in the British socialist press. For example, in February 1919, the Workers’ Dreadnought reprinted “Lenin to American Working Men,” together with a picture of “Nikolai Lenin.” As Lenin explained:

The Workmen’s and Peasants’ Soviets are a new type of state, a new highest form of democracy, a particular form of the dictatorship of the proletariat, a mode of conducting the business of the State without the bourgeoisie and against the bourgeoisie. For the first time democracy is placed at the service of the masses, of the workers, and ceases to be democracy for the rich, as it is, in the last analysis, in all capitalist, yes in all democratic republics.\(^{15}\)

Even as the Communist Party of Great Britain was beginning its life in the summer of 1920, The Communist carried Zinoviev’s report of the “Theses” passed by the congress of the Third International in Moscow: “The Soviets are the dictatorship of the proletariat. The Constituent Assembly is the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. To try to reconcile the dictatorship of the workers with the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie is impossible.”\(^{16}\) That December, The Communist also published Tom Bell’s “Open Letter to the Rank and File of the I.L.P.,” which urged:

Against the parliamentary democracy, comrades, you must oppose the principle of direct representation of the working class through the Workers’ Councils. This dictatorship of the proletariat is and must be the means for the expropriation of capital and the elimination of private property in the means of production.\(^{17}\)

Little wonder that optimistic British socialists continued to conflate the “dictatorship” with “soviet democracy,” a form of democracy they believed to be superior in its democratic reality to anything that was or could be available within the limitations of “bourgeois” states. Besides, the dictatorship element in the Bolshevik revolution was already becoming redundant — or so it seemed.
The Temporary Nature of the Dictatorship

In the spring of 1919, Eden and Cedar Paul wrote of “communist ergatocracy — the administration of the workers by the workers — with (as a preliminary stage) the dictatorship of the proletariat exercised through workers’ committees or soviets.” Just how long this “preliminary stage” might be expected to last was, as always, left unestimated, although the Pauls’ formulation in the same letter implied a much longer time scale than that envisaged by most other writers of the period. They could see, they concluded, “no way of avoiding these temporary dictatorships so long as great bolshevist communities and great capitalist states confront one another within the confines of one narrow planet. The Russian revolution of 1917 must become the world revolution. Not until then will there be peace on earth.”

But it was much more common on the Left to suggest that the dictatorship — if not yet the state itself — was already beginning to “wither away.” As early as August 1918, the Workers’ Dreadnought included the following reassuring piece of dialogue about the situation in Russia in an article titled “Socialism in the Making”:

“What is the thing which most impresses you in your daily life under Socialism?” we asked one of our friends.

He smiled: “It’s freedom.”

“But is there not a dictatorship?”

He replied: “Every government is in some degree a dictatorship however mild. During war the dictatorship became everywhere more rigorous. Here too.”

But such dictatorship as there was in Russia was not only mild but temporary — at least according to the friend, who assured his comrades that “when the counter-revolution has been vanquished the Revolutionary dictatorship will relax.” He also noted that “in Russia the bourgeoisie, the counter-revolutionaries, have more freedom than the ordinary workers have here”:

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The bourgeois counter-revolutionaries constantly hold public meetings. They have complete freedom except to bear arms, and the inoffensive bourgeoisie may carry arms; it is only the counter-revolutionary who is not allowed to though he usually does!“

Not that there were many counter-revolutionaries, or opponents of the regime of any sort, in the friend’s view:

“The moderate socialists have no programme except the substitution of the Constituent Assembly for the Soviet. But if the Constituent Assembly had not been abolished by the Bolsheviki; if the Mensheviki had then obtained power, the Mensheviki reign would have been very short, for the mass of the people are Bolsheviki.”

Again, in February 1919, reporting on the setting up of a commission of enquiry on Russia by the Berne Conference of the Socialist International, The Call commented:

Neither Mr J. R. MacDonald or Mr Branting can quite make up their minds on the subject the commission is to enquire upon. Both appear to agree that the dictatorship of the proletariat, in certain circumstances, is justified and even necessary, whilst both contend that the dictatorship must not be made the permanent basis for government or administration. Long before they reached these equivocal conclusions the Bolsheviks had made a continued dictatorship unnecessary by the profoundly just rule that every able-bodied person should give some labour service to the community. When all are proletariat there can be no dictatorship.

But if some managed to virtually spirit away dictatorship in this fashion, it was also in the context of the dictatorship of the proletariat that the role of the “revolutionary party” began to occupy a more prominent place in Left discourse.
The Revolutionary Party and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat

The distinction between class and party was becoming blurred. One example of the new emphasis came from Charles Roden Buxton's explanation of Lenin's view of revolution, which appeared in Labour Leader in May 1919.²² For the Communist, the starting point was recognition that “the present state of society is the dictatorship of the minority that owns property in considerable quantities, which controls our minds, particularly through education and the Press.” The initial step towards changing this situation “must be taken by a minority acting on behalf of the non-propertied. . . . It is futile to expect that you can convert a majority of the people at once to the new view of things. Universal Suffrage and Parliamentary Democracy, under the prevailing conditions, will merely register the acquiescence of the mass in the present condition of society.” Therefore, Buxton argued, “an ‘advanced guard’ as Lenin calls it . . . must take control of the Government. This minority will in practice be found among the industrial workers.”

Eventually, he continued, the propertied would “come over to the regime,” a process hastened by penalizing those who did not. In the meantime, the transition would be “essentially a stage of civil war, but it need not be carried on by methods of violence.” The revolutionary government must refuse its opponents any share in political power. At this stage there could be no constituent assembly chosen by universal suffrage, and the revolutionary government “must keep in its own hands the machinery by which public opinion is formed.” There could be no free press, freedom of assembly, or uncontrolled education. Yet at the same time this process “must be clearly recognised as one of transition only.” The “ultimate goal” was “complete democracy.”²³

In November 1919, the Workers’ Dreadnought published extracts from the Manifesto of the Comintern, which sought to explain the role of the dictatorship of the proletariat. The proletariat was to be given “the favoured position in the community,” though only as “a provisional institution,” until such time as the bourgeoisie was “gradually absorbed into the working groups.” In the meantime, the soviets would “draw constantly increasing numbers of workers into the State
Administration,” by which process would “the entire working population gradually become part of the Government.” As the manifesto also noted, “the industrial proletariat is favoured in this system because it is the most aggressive, best organised, and politically ripest class, under whose leadership the semi-proletarians and small farmers will be gradually elevated.”

The sociological concept of the working class was giving way, not without resistance, to a political definition of the proletariat. The conflict between these two conceptions was captured in a book review in the September 1920 issue of The Guildsman. “Hussein” contrasted two differing descriptions of the dictatorship of the proletariat, those of R.W. Postgate’s The Bolshevik Theory and of Cedar and Eden Paul’s Creative Revolution. Postgate, “a Guild Communist,” was “very much ‘down’ on what he called ‘Blanquism’ and does not like to have his ‘DP’ confused with minority rule. Mr and Mrs Paul, on the other hand, explicitly recognise that ‘DP’ means dictatorship of a minority, and stress the point that the term ‘proletariat’ only included the class-conscious workers.”

The idea that the Communist Party, as such, might legitimately stand for the proletariat appeared quite gradually. In May 1919, the Workers’ Dreadnought carried an article by Karl Radek titled “The Dictatorship of the Proletariat.” To begin with, Radek affirmed the role of the (otherwise unidentified) “class conscious” minority. Responding to those who argued that the dictatorship was only applicable to countries like Russia, where the working class was a minority, he asserted: “In no country in the world will the Revolution be the act of the majority of the population. For Capitalism is not merely physical control of production, but everywhere it controls the minds of the masses as well.” Consequently, it was always a minority that carried out the revolution, though its success depended on “its affinity to the interests of the masses.” Only during the “development” of the revolution “does it attract the majority and, thereby conquer.”

By early in 1920, W.H. Ryde was referring, in The Call, to “the dictatorship of the proletariat and poorer peasants under the leadership
of the Russian Communists.” 26 By July, L. Leslie of the Aberdeen Communist Group, who had attended the founding conference of the Communist Party (British Section of the Third International) as a “proxy delegate,” was brutally clear. He was concerned particularly about the Glasgow-based Scottish Workers’ Committee, which had “no spine” and included “opportunists” from sections that were still part of the Second International:

The Soviet or Committee system must come under the dictatorship of the Communist Party, and a firm hand should be kept above the vacillating Menshevik persons and committees such as you have in Britain. The least rope given to the parties in Soviet Russia who come under Communist surveillance would be the betrayal of “All Power to the Soviets.” 27

This was unusually frank. Advocacy of Communist Party rule was generally expressed in softer terms. For example, in April and May 1922, The Communist published a series of five articles by T.A. Jackson, intended “for beginners” and jointly titled “What Communism Means.” In the penultimate article, on revolution, Jackson exposed “the ‘Democratic’ Fallacy of bourgeois states.” His final contribution concluded that “the Communist Party is not secret, it is not a conspiracy, it will only be violent when forced to in self-defence.” The alternative to capitalism was “by way of the Dictatorship of the Toiling Masses, which in turn can be expressed and exercised only through the medium such an organised, trained, experienced, and disciplined Party.” 28

But, long before this, the growing appeal of soviet democracy had, in the eyes of some, begun to pose a problem. In July 1920, A.A. Watts, who had succeeded H. Alexander as BSP treasurer the previous year, noted in The Call: “The ‘Soviet idea’ is now recognised in words by many ‘independent’ Socialists and even by Right Socialists. We shall only be able to prevent these elements from distorting the Soviet idea if we have a strong Communist Party capable of defining the policy of the Soviets and leading them in its train.” The preaching of wide

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“autonomy” would only weaken the party, he argued, and assist “the petty bourgeois, anarchical, centrifugal elements.” The same article had renewed the attack on the German “Lefts” who wanted the Communist Party “to melt into the Soviets,” which would then take the place of the party. This, said Watts, was “fundamentally incorrect and reactionary.”

It remained vital for proponents of the role of the party to stress its mass support. This is illustrated in an exchange that took place in The Guildsman in the last three months of 1919 between R. Palme Dutt, who was to become a leading figure in the CPGB, and Maurice Reckitt. Their arguments over the meaning of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” also illustrate the gulf that was opening up between supporters of Bolshevism and their opponents in the socialist movement. Dutt began by defining his terms: “Dictatorship, an extraordinary power for a specific purpose. Proletariat, the workers regarded as in conflict with the capitalists — therefore containing potentially all workers, including the managerial, but actually according to their alignment in the immediate struggle.” All socialism, Dutt went on, implied a belief in “what is in effect the dictatorship of the proletariat; the only difference concerns form and sanction. Even parliamentary socialists agree on the employment of force . . . to oust the capitalist class.” And while parliaments claimed to “hold the assent” of the majority, the soviets could more justly be said to represent its will. The role of the party was to provide sufficient leadership to avoid chaos: “The only safeguard against the horrors of a fumbled revolution is the existence of a clear, direct, and powerful revolutionary party.”

For Reckitt, the phrase in question, “as commonly employed,” suggested “the capture of power in the name of the ‘proletariat’ by a violent section acting outside the recognised Labour movement . . . in accordance with a set of economic doctrines not understood outside a restricted circle; and refusing to share its authority not merely with the ‘bourgeoisie,’ but even with any other section, however numerous or important, of its own Labour movement.” In response, Dutt claimed
that the Bolsheviks not only had the support of the soviets “but have successively received into their midst each section of the Russian labour or Socialist movement as soon as it has shown its readiness to be labour i.e. by leave off [sic] co-operating with the bourgeoisie.”

What would come to be called the “leading role of the Communist Party” was emerging in “Bolshevik” rhetoric, but as yet it was not greatly stressed and was hedged with qualifications emphasizing the sovereignty of the soviets and the reality of massive popular support. However, defenders of certain aspects of “real” dictatorship were beginning to appear.

**Defenders of Dictatorship**

It was to be expected that those on the Left who had rejected Bolshevism from the outset would be implacably hostile to any notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat and dismissive of any semblance of reality that it might have. Thus, Archibald Lee, writing in *Justice*, rejected the idea that socialism or democracy of any variety existed in Russia: “There is not even that latest development in class rule, the dictatorship of the proletariat; there is merely an oligarchy of a dozen adventurers or so, originally thrust upon Russia by the German Kaiserdom to dish the Entente.”

Much more significant is the appearance of statements from pro-Bolshevik sources that, in substance and/or in language, defended the use of authoritarian and sometimes violent methods by the Bolsheviks. In a piece titled “Russian Bolshevism — Tyranny or Freedom?” that had originally appeared in the American newspaper *The Public* and was reproduced in the *Dreadnought* in 1919, the writer informed readers that “Lenin, when he overthrew the Kerensky government, made no claim to be the creator of a new democracy. . . . There is no other road to Socialism except the dictatorship of the proletariat and the merciless suppression of the rule of the exploiter.” Granted, this was still rather abstract and open to interpretation. But was J.F. Hodgson, later to become an early member of the Communist Party executive, simply resorting to metaphor when he wrote in *The Call:*
“The Socialist Revolution is no matter for kid-gloves; perhaps soon, like Napoleon’s ragged army, a proletarian army will sweep through Europe and we must do our share in the fight.”

Defence of dictatorial methods became more explicit in 1920, although the use of such methods was usually presented as the fault of the workers’ opponents. Reviewing Lenin’s *The Proletarian Revolution* in *The Call*, Tom Quelch charged the leaders of the ILP and others who held similar views with failing to realize that in the event of a “Workers’ Government” gaining power in Britain, the ruling class “would resort to violence which the workers in their turn would have to counter with violence.” He therefore concluded that “the fierce logic of facts compels the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat.”

In an article titled “Democratic Republic Versus Soviet Republic,” which appeared in *The Socialist* early in 1920, N. Ossinsky was clear that a dictatorship was necessary in order to defeat the bourgeoisie. Therefore, “we must have an unlimited power, an iron power, otherwise called a dictatorship. (A dictatorship is one invested with the power of exacting obedience under pain of death.)” However, according to his account, the Bolsheviks were far from being all-out dictators: “The Bolsheviks do not wish to control all power. They do not wish to exterminate all the demi-bourgeois parties which have one eye on the employers and one on the workers and peasants. The Bolsheviks are pitiless only to the bourgeoisie, the wealthy, because such is the will of the Russian workers.”

At this stage, in the summer of 1920, even the *Workers’ Dreadnought* was in favour of certain limitations being placed on the press:

The proletarian dictatorship will not misinterpret the principle of the freedom of the press into allowing newspapers and other publications to advocate the return to a state of society that was based on class exploitation. With this limit only, the discussion of ethical and economic ideals and principles of administration and social organisation will be unrestricted and the press will be entirely free.
This was followed three weeks later by the publication, over the period of a fortnight, of Lenin’s article “Democracy and the Proletarian Dictatorship.” The first instalment included among its subheadings “Thieves to Be Shot,” “Dictatorship: A Great Word,” and “The Necessity of Force.” According to Lenin, “the trouble with previous revolutions was this — that the revolutionary zeal of the masses, which kept them vigilant and gave them strength, mercilessly to suppress the elements of decay, did not last long.” Defining the dictatorship of the proletariat as “the dictatorship of the class-conscious people,” Lenin claimed that the “exploited toilers” were now discovering that “the disciplined class-conscious vanguard of the people is their most reliable leader.” The problem, he said, was that the revolution in Russia was “too mild”:

The nearer we get to the complete military suppression of the bourgeoisie, the more dangerous become for us the petty-bourgeois inclinations. And these inclinations cannot be combated by propaganda and agitation only, by the organisation of emulation, by the selection of organisers, they must also be met with force.

The instalment concluded with Lenin’s statement that there is “absolutely no contradiction between the Soviet (Socialist) democracy and the use of dictatorial power of individuals.” What this might mean in the workplace was revealed the following week, when Lenin asserted:

We must learn to combine the stormy democracy of the meetings, overflowing with fresh energy, breaking all restraint, the democracy of the toiling masses — with iron discipline during work, with absolute submission to the will of one person, the Soviet director, during work.38

It would be unduly cynical to see all those who tried to conjure away the really “dictatorial” aspects of the dictatorship of the proletariat as deliberately indulging in a smoke-and-mirrors exercise intended to deceive. Rather they were, for the most part at least, struggling to reconcile their faith in soviet democracy, which had been a crucial part of what had attracted them to the Russian Revolution in the first place, with
the desire to support the actual regime that had now emerged from it. Much of the reported violence and dictatorial behaviour of the Bolshevists could be dismissed with the comforting thought that it was the result of hostile capitalist propaganda and the Russian reality was in fact much closer to what Bolshevik supporters in Britain wanted it to be.

Statements such as those quoted above from Lenin’s “Democracy and the Proletarian Dictatorship” now seem to be clear and explicit enough. Yet the British Left was generally reluctant to recognize that a dictatorship of the proletariat might mean anything more than a real, working-class democracy of the soviets, from which, at the end of the day, exclusion was purely voluntary. It was not until 1921 that the New Statesman reviewer of Arthur Ransome’s The Crisis in Russia would conclude that “Mr Ransome’s account of the working of the proletarian dictatorship . . . shows very plainly how the effective government in Russia has passed from the Soviets into the hands of the Communist Party, so that the dictatorship is in effect exercised by the Communist Party.” As we shall see, it was, surprisingly, the “British Bolsheviks” of the Socialist Labour Party who were to have the most disparaging and dismissive things to say about the whole idea of the “Dictatorship,” at least as applied to Britain and comparably “developed” countries.

Meanwhile, in 1920, it had been Bertrand Russell — who, as noted earlier, was sympathetic to guild socialism and was well aware of the less “dictatorial” interpretations that many on the Left were giving to “the Dictatorship of the Proletariat” — who wrote:

Friends of Russia here think of the dictatorship of the Proletariat as merely a new form of representative government, in which only the working men and women have votes, and the constituencies are partly occupational, not geographical. They think that “proletariat” means “proletariat,” but “dictatorship” does not quite mean “dictatorship.” This is the opposite of the truth. When a Russian Communist speaks of dictatorship, he means the word literally, but when he speaks of the proletariat, he means the word in a Pickwickian sense. He means the “class conscious” part of the proletariat, i.e., the Communist Party.
By the time Russell wrote, the issue of the immediate future of the party had been resolved. But it had been the efforts to come to terms with the implications of the “Dictatorship of the Proletariat” that had, more than anything else, marked the struggle in the ILP over the determination of its Left Wing to seek affiliation to the new Communist International.