

DEMOCRATIC CENTRALISM

Section Three of the Aims and Constitution of the Communist Party of Great Britain is headed Democratic Centralism and opens with the following paragraph:

"To conduct organised activity, and to give leadership in all circumstances of the class struggle, the Communist Party bases itself on the theory and practice of Marxism-Leninism and must be able to act as a unified force. Therefore the Communist Party bases its organisation upon democratic centralism, which combines the democratic participation of the membership in Party life with an elected centralised leadership capable of directing the entire Party."

The supreme authority of the Party is the National Congress which meets every two years and elects an Executive Committee to implement its decisions and to formulate policy within the framework of those decisions. The decisions of the Executive Committee are binding upon all lower committees and upon the whole membership which must accept, and work for, the policy of the Party.

When the Communist International was in existence, democratic centralism started at the level of the World Congress but since its dissolution, democratic centralism has started at the level of the National Congress.

In a speech to the International Meeting of Communist and Workers' Parties held in Moscow from the 5th to the 17th June 1969, John Gollan said:

"The question of relations between Communist Parties, and the principles governing their role and activity, is not, in our view, relevant to the agenda of this conference. Each Party is sovereign. It alone, through its highest authority, its National Congress, can decide its policy, its activities and its role. There is not and cannot be any collective body or directing centre which can usurp the sovereign rights of Parties and decide such matters for them."

As this International Meeting was not a World Congress called to take decisions on an international scale, but simply one called "for the purpose of exchanging opinion and experience and for collective discussion and elaboration of topical political and theoretical questions," what Gollan said was substantially true, though one might question his implication that there could never again "be any collective body or directing centre" at international level.

Within the present organisational system, the Communist Party of Great Britain, for instance, cannot have a "policy" or take "decisions" regarding internal matters relating to the Communist Parties of the Soviet Union or of Czechoslovakia. These are two sovereign Parties. They alone, through their highest authorities, their national congresses, can decide their policies, their activities and their role. For the Communist Party of Great Britain to try and decide such matters for them would be to usurp their sovereign rights.

Of course, no one could deny the right of any individual member to hold views contrary to those of the General Secretaries of the Communist Parties of the Soviet Union and of Czechoslovakia; nor even his right to express them in public, if he wished to do so, making it clear, in the process, that he was speaking in a personal capacity. But such views, even if shared by the whole of the National Executive and a majority of the members of the Party itself, could not be made obligatory so far as the rest of the membership was concerned. The system of democratic centralism can be applied to a "policy" (a course of