



An introduction to Worker-communism

*The following is the transcript of a speech, delivered in English, by Koorosh Modaressi, the leader of the Worker-communist Party of Iran – Hekmatist at a gathering of communist and leftists activists in Lille, France on 11th and 12th November 2006. KOMONIST accepts responsibility for transcribing and editing the speech. **KOMONIST***

Thank you for inviting me.

The topic that I want to talk about today is the Worker-communism. It is obviously very difficult to talk about such a subject in such a short period of time. It is as if one has been asked to talk about communism in an hour or an hour and half. Worker communism is synonymous with Communism, not a word less and not a word more. We had to use the term Worker-communism because we wanted to distinguish our communism from other movements, other ideologies and other systems of thoughts which call themselves communism.

As I mentioned, this discussion will be brief. For further details I will refer you to Marx and Engels works especially the German Ideology. I will use the concepts that were first developed by Marx and Engels in that piece of work during their self clarification. I will also refer you to Mansoor Hekmat's works, which I am afraid there are not many in French. Some of his works are available in English. These works can be accessed on Mansoor Hekmat's public archives on the internet (www.hekmat-archive.com) I will specially refer to three of his works that are available in English:

- 1- The experience of the workers revolution in the soviet union;
- 2- Our differences; and
- 3- The Fundamental Characterises of Worker-communism.

When talking about the Worker-communism one can describe it in two ways. First the way it was developed and how it came about; its historical perspective

and what questions it had to answer and formulate itself by. And the other way is to describe the Worker-communism as a system. It is in indeed a system. We can talk about its philosophical and economical bases, its methods, and its critics of the capitalist society and so on.

Let me start from the first view. I am sure you know that all the major philosophical, political and social movements and ideas were basically influenced by major social events or revolutions. The development of these ideas and systems are not an abstract academic process. The carrier of good ideas is the social events which brings issues to the forth.

For example Hegel is deeply influenced by the French revolution, Marx is basically formulating the experience and the outcome of the events around 1848 revolutions. With the "German Ideology" and the Manifesto in place, the basic ideas of Marxism are there by 1848. After this Marx and Engels start to build on it. Both Hegel and Marx project their views in the light of given huge social events, i.e. revolutions.

Take Lenin for example. If there was not for the October revolution Lenin would have been forgotten and would have probably been less known than Rosa Luxemburg. Lenin, prior to the October revolution was not very well known. Not many people had heard of him. Trotsky was better known than Lenin. The close link between revolutions with a specific system of thoughts or political movement is the key issue here.

Hence, without knowing the French revolution and the 1848 revolutions one does not quite understand what Marx says in works like "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Luis Bonaparte".

► Page 7

Freedom, Equality, Workers' Rule!

► *Page 6 An Introduction*

Similarly to better understand what Worker-communism literatures are talking about we must know the context in which these ideas have been formulated.

Worker-communism was formulated under the influence of two major events. Events that raised many essential questions in our minds; put many dilemmas and inconsistencies between our practice and our theory. We were faced with huge challenges and problems to tackle.

The two experiences are first the Iranian revolution of 1979 or rather its defeat in early 80s and second the collapse of the Eastern Block in the late 1980s and early 90s.

The Iranian revolution of 1979 was very special and particular in the sense that it was a revolution which occurred in a capitalist society. Iran was not a “semi-feudal” society, it was not a backward or colonial society; it was an industrial and modern capitalist society. Iran was a “mature” society with a capitalist system. It was probably the most industrialised country in the region. The revolution occurred in a country which had been through two previous bourgeois – democratic revolutions in early 20th century. Neither Turkey nor any of the Arab countries had had that kind of revolution. Nasser in Egypt, Ataturk in Turkey, like all of other leaders in the Middle Eastern countries rose by coup d’état or during an anti-colonial struggle.

The 1979 Revolution also was special because it was an urban revolution in which the working class was the major player. This was not the case in the Nicaraguan or Cuban Revolutions. Iranian revolution was a rare event. It was a rare and valuable experience for us as communists.

In 1997 the backbone of the Iranian regime broke when the oil workers stopped working and the people came out onto the streets with the slogans like “Our Oil Workers, Our Staunch Leaders” and this was not the slogan of a fraction of the population. This was the slogan of probably a million people marching in the streets. And yet we were defeated. The working class was defeated.

I think it was Lenin who said that the experience of one day in the revolutionary period is equivalent to 1000 days in regular life. This was the case for us. The only difference that we may have from the activists of our generation in other part of the world is that we have been through that experience; we have par-

ticipated in an uprising, we have participated in organising workers, we have tried to capture the political power and unfortunately we were defeated by the most obscure political force, i.e., the political Islam.

It is hard to imagine but during a period lasting a year or a year and half the following questions were placed before the working class and the communist groups and organisations.

What is the relationship between the major classes in the political arena? How to distinguish between the capitalist interests and the working class interests? For example the Islamic Republic came to power with the slogan of the “Nationalisation of all Industries”, We had to clarify ourselves about the idea of progressive national bourgeoisie and if such a thing existed. And it meant to engage in discussions on the streets and factories not just in terms political and theoretical analysis.

I will give you an example. There was a strike in a factory close to Tehran. We were a bunch of youth and students and went to support the workers in that factory. The revolutionary guards were around to suppress the workers. The owner of the factory who claimed to be a leftist started addressing the workers. He turned to the workers and said something to this effect “look Iran is a country under the influence of imperialism and I am a national bourgeois, an anti-imperialist and progressive at this stage of revolution. Please go back to your work and let me do my job.” One did not need to have read Marx to realise what he was saying was rubbish. Bourgeoisie is bourgeoisie that is all. This was an example of the kind of situations we were in. Another example, at the early stages of the Iranian revolution workers had set up councils or soviets in many workplaces to fight for better wages, for pensions, for unemployment benefits and other similar demands. The workers council in a company called General- a subsidiary of General Electric had organised a sit in inside the factory. I think they were protesting for unemployment benefit. At the same time in the vicinity of the General Electric compound a group of people had clashed with the security forces and it seemed like the uprising against the regime was taking place. Through our contacts amongst the General Electric workers we called on them and ask them to come out and join the uprising and let us defend and fight for our rights. We were attacked by the organisers of the sit in and accused of being agents of the bourgeoisie who wanted to break up their sit in saying something to the effect of “the hell with uprising we want our unemployment benefit” .

► **Page 8**

◀ *Page 7 An Introduction to.....*

We were also faced with attacks on freedom, all aspects of freedom. Attacks on freedom of speech; attacks on women and the imposition of the veil. And when we approached the oil workers to do something about it they returned all the classical definitions of the working class's struggles which means only the economic struggles. Struggles to defend freedom had nothing to do with their struggles and they left women- half of the population and half of the working class- alone on the streets. And when the government clamped down on the freedom of speech nobody did anything about it.

That short revolutionary period threw up the question of what is the relationship between the political and economic demands of the working class. And in search of answers we had to go back to Marx and read hundreds of pages of Marx and Lenin to find an answer to these questions. We had to find an answer because our daily lives depended on it.

I do not know how familiar are you with the Iraq – Iran war. Iraq attacked Iran in 1980 and the war broke out. Again we were faced with the question of what should we do? Should we defend the “motherland”? Should we take up arms against the Islamic regime and side with Iraq? Should we do nothing? The regime started mobilising the whole country against the war and with it started to suppress all aspects of social life in that country. The question that presented itself at this time was not just a matter of taking a position. It was the matter of what to do because the aeroplanes were bombing us and we were sent to the fronts and we had to do something, not just say something. We had to organise a movement and raise a banner. We were under the bombings and were being caught on the streets and sent to the fronts. These were some of the simpler questions. We were faced with thousands of questions everyday and we had to decide what to do.

Kurdistan, the region in the western Iran, for some historical reasons was outside the control of the central government. In this region semi-leftist and semi-nationalist groups were enjoying more influence. The Islamic regime attacked Kurdistan to suppress freedom and exert its authority. There were couple of interesting developments in this situation. For one there was no communist organisation or party. There was this semi leftist organisation called Komala which called itself Marxist but it was more a Maoist kind of organisation and there was the traditional nationalist party,- Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDP). And when the regime attacked Kurdistan the first

question that was thrown in front us in Tehran (I was in Tehran in those days) was what should we do? Should we support the movement against the Islamic regime that was organised by this kind of leftist or by the nationalist movement? What should we do? By this we meant not what is right or wrong. We were there we had to either pick up the arms or just leave.

Some people decided to pick up arms and some people left. As vital as that. And some political groups in Iran either supported the movement which resisted the Islamic Republic or sided with the Islamic Republic itself under the pretext of the regime being anti-imperialist.

Can you see the line of reasoning? I remember discussing this issue with a friend of mine in Tehran who was on the side of the Iranian government and advocated that the Iranian government was an anti-imperialist force and we should support it. He referred me to Lenin and what he had said about anti-imperialism and also referred me to what Stalin had said. He was a Maoist and reminded me of what Mao has said. I did not believe in Maoism in those days either, it was not attractive for me. But Marx and Lenin were quite attractive to me. This is what I said. If Marx has said that we should support Khomeini then I am not a Marxist. If Lenin has said we should support Khomeini then I am not a Leninist. I am standing for my own values.

What I am trying to say is in a revolutionary period you have to clarify yourself. Thirty years ago we had to deal with and discuss some of the essential issues of class struggles head on.

Another interesting observation during this period was the situation in Kurdistan. Kurdistan at the beginning of the Iranian was not under the control of the central government. A period of openness and relative freedom existed lasting about six months. During this period working within the labour movement and organising workers was free. Labour activists started to organise workers. In the city of Sanandaj- the provincial capital of Kurdistan- a big union had been set up by the leftist groups working in the urban areas. This union organised frequent streets protests, with large number of workers marching on the streets and calling for jobs and unemployment benefit, asking for a better working condition and things like that. Komala, the Maoist leftist organisation which was active in the area had nothing to do with this union and its activities. When the Islamic regime attacked Kurdistan all the workers left their unions and took up arms and joined either the nationalists parties or Komala.

◀ *Page 8 An Introduction to.....*

This situation paused the question that in the revolutionary period which one is more important, the political agenda or working for just a kind of trade union organisation? Why a trade union type organisation snaps and breaks up totally and the other, the political organisations expands? Those leftists groups that had organised those unions had their own armed forces but nobody joined them. The reason was that in the political arena they were not a credible force. They were not the kind of forces that people could say I will join those people and we can do something.

During this period, from the theoretical point of view, was a period in which a Marxist trend of thinking, an orthodox Marxist kind of thing entered into the Iranian left arena which was primarily represented by Mansoor Hekmat. It called itself "Revolutionary Marxism". And it was based on couple of basic ideas. One was that there was no progressive bourgeoisie and the bourgeois class, either national or international; all of them have a common interest in suppressing the working class to access cheap labour. All of them have vested interest in the dictatorship or despotism of the system because it is securing cheap labour. They need a guaranteed pool of cheap labour, all of them benefit from this situation. So there is no freedom loving democratic bourgeoisie in that country.

The other idea was that Iran was a capitalist society and the working class should form its own political party and the political side of the Iranian working class's struggle is as important as the economic demands. And also the working class should actively enter into the political arena through its own party.

The Revolutionary Marxism started to criticise the Iranian left and the Iranian mainstream communisms. The Revolutionary Marxism at that time identified populism as dominant trend within the Iranian radical left and started to criticise not only their theoretical foundation but their answers to the questions that I mentioned earlier on. The Revolutionary Marxism while criticising the traditional left's answers to the questions that I referred to started to formulate its own answers to those questions. A group led by Mansoor Hekmat, the "Unity of Communist Militants" (UCM), was driving these struggles ahead and again because of the revolutionary period and in which everything is moving fast, this group polarised the Iranian leftist's arguments. Leftist organisations and communist organisations very sharply and

very quickly polarised and the whole system was divided into two sections; one called themselves the Revolutionary Marxism and sided with the UCM and the other section were either dissolved under pressure from the Islamic regime like "Peykar", "Razmandeghan" and so many others which suffered splits and disintegration or disappeared altogether.

At the end of this process in 1983, the Communist Party of Iran was founded. Right from the beginning it was a major force in the Iranian politics. I had the honour of being a member of its founding congress. Komala the leftist organisation in Kurdistan that I mentioned earlier joined the Party right from the beginning. Most of the leftist organisations or left activists and communists outside Kurdistan also affiliated to this Party. The Communist Party right from the beginning started to organise and continued to re-organise in different areas. For example at that time a war was going on in Kurdistan and we organised a huge military campaign and armed struggle against the Islamic Republic in Kurdistan. Also right from the beginning we tried to work and organise within the working class and both in Kurdistan and in the rest of Iran and Tehran. We organised major events and set up organisations and were very active in the working class movement in those desperate and dark times. For example for a few years after the formation of the Communist Party we organised mass May Day rallies in Sanandaj and organised different kinds of local organisations and co-operatives in Tehran and other places.

We ran into different kinds of problems. We were attacked by the Kurdish nationalist Party, Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran- and we were dragged into fighting for a couple of years. These were the kind of questions we faced in those days.

As I mentioned earlier, with all our efforts, from early 80s it was clear that the revolution was defeated by the most obscure political force, i.e., the political Islam. Obviously we had to ask ourselves why this had happened.

By 1987 the Islamic Republic intensified its military campaign in Kurdistan and we had to completely withdraw from Kurdistan. Our armed forces were forced out of Kurdistan and into Iraq and Kurdistan was completely occupied by the Islamic Republic. And in Tehran our organisation was suppressed. Many of our activists were executed and most of the working class and leftist organisations were completely dismantled, suppressed and most of their activists were killed by the regime. ▶ page 10

► Page 9 An Introduction to.....

By this time it was quite clear to us, especially to Hekmat that it is the end of the Eastern Block. He had written about it many years before it happened and he predicted that this block and the wall will come down. And he said, rightly, that although we have never approved of the Soviet Union, although we never accepted the Soviet Union and China to be communist or socialist societies and although we have always been a critic of the Eastern Blocks nevertheless, “the wall” will come down on us and on

all aspects of egalitarianism including socialism. He said “then for each single remaining Marxist you will find one thousand ex-Marxists.” And it happened.

The remaining part of this speech will be printed in the next issue of KOMONIST