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Two Conceptions of Democracy

“Democracy,” by definition, means “rule by the people.” It is also generally accepted that people living in a democratic society are guaranteed certain political rights, such as freedom of speech and the press, freedom to organize into political associations, and so forth. This entire conception of democracy has arisen out of the struggle of all human beings to participate in determining the kind of society they live in.

And indeed in the course of the last 200 years and more, the working class and broad masses of people, through continuous struggles, have achieved such democratic transformations as the winning and extension of universal suffrage, the creation of many kinds of organizations of the working and oppressed people, nearly universal acceptance (at least in words) of the idea of the equality of all human beings, regardless of race, nationality, sex, etc.. Most importantly, as a result of the continuous struggles of the people, today the whole of humanity has been drawn into social and political life and all human beings are demanding a genuine participation and a decision-making role in the political process and the political system.

Yet the goal of democracy – rule by the people – has not been achieved. In fact, in many ways, people feel more alienated and excluded from the political process and government. In the U.S., while the people have the right to vote, the right to nominate or select the candidates for office is reserved as a privilege of the Democratic and Republican parties. Thus the people are denied the means of governance both because the elected officials are not accountable to the electors and because those elected receive their primary and decisive man-

date, not from the people, but from the two big political parties. Furthermore, the Executive Branch of government by usurping – in law and in fact – the “residual powers” (i.e. those powers not expressly defined in the Constitution) has negated the sovereignty of the people and constituted itself as an arbitrary and absolute power. The broad masses of people continually find that such rights as are proclaimed as universal in the contemporary political system, such as the equality of nationalities, are denied in practice.

Apologists for the status quo try to explain away the gulf between the popular demand for democracy and the actual political system prevailing in the U.S. by re-defining democracy itself.

On a world scale, the big Western powers put forward the notion (which has even been codified in certain international protocols) that democracy is nothing more than a political system which includes “competitive elections” and a constitutional declaration of various civil liberties such as freedom of conscience, etc. Such questions as whether or not the people are actually sovereign, whether or not the people are guaranteed the means to exercise their promised civil liberties are considered irrelevant. For example, Samuel Huntington, a former U.S. National Security advisor and a leading bourgeois political scientist, rejects the “classical theory of democracy which defined democracy in terms of the will of the people and the common good.” Instead Huntington reduces democracy to a political system in which “individuals acquire power by means of competitive elections.” And Huntington goes on to insist that governments which are sanctioned by elections are democratic even when they are “inefficient, corrupt, shortsighted, irresponsible, dominated by special interests and incapable of adopt-

ing policies demanded by the public good.” Similarly, Robert Dahl, author of several standard U.S. textbooks on political science and democracy, rejects as “idealist” and “utopian” such classical definitions of democracy as “rule of the people” or “popular sovereignty” and re-defines democracy as “polyarchy” – a system in which “competing elites” hold power but allow “free elections” as a means to periodically determine which section of the ruling class will wield the power.

In others words, contemporary bourgeois political science has backtracked and resurrected feudal theories which justify the wielding of absolute power by a ruling elite. According to bourgeois theorists, political power cannot originate with or reside in the people, and the current system of elections admittedly boils down to nothing more than a means whereby the masses of people give their consent to the rule of the elite. Thus the working class and broad masses of people are confronted with the problem of providing a modern definition of democracy which enables them both to refute the bourgeois theorists as well as carry through the political transformations necessary to actually create a political power “of the people, by the people and for the people.”

One of the central concerns of such a modern definition of democracy must be to go beyond the mere formal declaration of “political equality” and “universal rights” or “civil liberties.” It is necessary to define the MEANS which will guarantee in practice the rights of the people and the sovereignty of the people. This question of spelling out the means required to actually give life to the slogans of democracy has, from the very beginning, been one of the central points

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of contention.

In the struggle against feudalism, the capitalist class rallied the people under the slogans of “freedom” and “equality.” These slogans were directed against the system of feudal privilege and absolutism justified in the name of the “divine right” of Kings. But the goal of the capitalist class was to wrest political power from the feudal aristocracy in order to capture the political power for itself and constitute itself as the ruling class. Thus the capitalists extended the concept of “equality” only to the political sphere, ignoring, especially, the economic inequality between classes which exists in any society based on private property in the means of production. In fact, the capitalists proclaimed the rights of private property as one of the most fundamental “natural rights of man.” Thus, in guarantying its economic predominance in society, the bourgeoisie in turn guaranteed its political ascendancy; the mere formal declaration of political equality is not enough to overcome the vast political advantages accruing to the economically dominant class.

Furthermore, in order to solidify its control over the political power, the bourgeoisie in the U.S. established not a democracy but a republic which it called a system of “representative democracy.” Aside from restricting the franchise to white, male property owners, the U.S. republic did not vest sovereignty in the people but rather in the elected officials and the Executive branch of government in particular. As the struggles of the masses extended the franchise, the capitalists were able to again thwart the democratic aspirations of the people by developing the Party system of government which reserved the right to nominate and select candidates as a privilege of the political parties controlled by the bourgeoisie themselves. “Representative democracy” based on the party system denies the people the means of governance, the means to actually constitute themselves as the political power and exercise it. The people are reduced to the role of voting cattle, giving their con-

sent to elected officials and political parties representing the upper classes.

Similarly the bourgeois conception of “freedom” and “civil liberties” was based on the idea of “freedom from restraint” – that is the idea that the state should not interfere with the “natural rights” of the individual. But the flaw in this conception is that it ignores the question of providing individuals with the means necessary to effectuate such rights as are proclaimed on paper. Take the question of “freedom of the press” for example. The U.S. constitution, in fact, does not guarantee “freedom of the press,” it merely says that the government cannot pass laws which infringe on use of the press. In other words, those who already own printing presses are safeguarded against state interference, while those who own no printing presses remain denied the means to exercise their “rights.”

But side by side with the bourgeois conception of democracy, there also arose the working class conception of democracy. From the earliest days of the struggle against feudalism, the advanced democratic thinkers and later the representatives of the working class, raised demands aimed both at guarantying the universality of the freedoms proclaimed by the bourgeoisie and at creating the means to insure the rights and sovereignty of the people. At the time of the French revolution, for example, demands were raised to enshrine not only the “rights of man” but the equal rights of women as well. In the U.S., many battles were waged from the time of the anti-colonial war until today, to establish mechanisms whereby the right to select, nominate and run for office would reside with the people and not with the political parties.

In addition, the working class put forward the demand to extend the concepts of equality and rights to the economic sphere, to demand the means to guarantee everyone the material conditions of existence such as the right to a job, to clothing, food, housing, to rest, to education and so forth. Frederick

Engels writes that while for the bourgeoisie the demand for equality meant the abolition of class privileges, for the working class, equality means the abolition of classes.

Today, the struggle between the two conceptions of democracy has become extremely acute. With the rise of monopoly capitalism, the maintenance of the system of monopoly privilege and power has become irreconcilably opposed to the development of democracy. On the other hand, the masses of people, with more than 200 years of experience under their belt, have irreversibly arrived on the historical and political stage and are demanding the inclusion of all human beings in determining the kind of society they live in, are demanding their role as decision-makers in society.

The struggle for a modern definition of democracy centers, amongst other things, on the demand of the working class and people to be guaranteed the means to translate the slogans of equality and freedom into practice. This includes the means to guarantee in practice such rights as freedom of speech and the press, freedom to organize into political associations, and so forth. It especially includes the means to guarantee the role of the masses of people in the selection of candidates, to guarantee the people’s direct role in governance. Realizing in practice such a modern definition of democracy necessarily requires a struggle against all forms of political privilege such as the legal monopoly extended to the Democratic and Republican parties. A modern definition of democracy also extends the question from the political sphere to the economic sphere, demanding that the economic rights of the people – the right of every individual in society to secure material conditions of existence – be guaranteed.

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