

Democratic centralism is the application of Marxist method to the question of how best to organize to lead the working class in the revolutionary transformation of society.

The Principles of Democratic Centralism

Democratic centralism is a method of organization that embodies two elements, democracy and centralism, in an ever-changing dialectical relationship of struggle and unity.

The democratic aspect of democratic centralism ensures effective decision making. It includes thorough discussion of political questions, full airing of minority viewpoints, collective decision making or periodic review of delegated decisions, criticism of all aspects of political, organizational, and theoretical practice.

Centralism includes leadership at all levels summing up the ideas and experience of the membership, drawing up proposals for the organization to consider, presenting political arguments for the positions it recommends, implementing policy, and responding decisively to guide the organization and the working class through the twists and turns of the struggle.

Without democracy, the leadership lacks accurate information about the actual unfolding of the class struggle, and especially about the needs and capabilities of the masses. Democracy means tapping the creativity and experience of many people to make sure that the organization's line corresponds to the real development of the class struggle in a scientific way.

On the other hand, without centralism the experiences of the party's members and of the masses would remain scattered. The organization would be unable to translate its knowledge and experience into a material force. Thus, there can be no democracy without centralism, and no centralism without democracy.

For a Communist Party which works to overthrow capitalism and in India the bourgeois landlord order, and replace it eventually with socialism, Party organisation has to be one which is equipped to wage the political, ideological and organisational struggle against the powerful State and the dominant ruling classes.

Lenin's conception of the Party was to build an organisation which could prepare and develop such a revolutionary mass movement. For this he stressed the importance of recruiting the advanced

sections of the working class into the Party who can be made politically conscious and hence constitute the vanguard.

While it is true that democratic centralism was evolved by the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party and Lenin played the instrumental role in fleshing out the concept, the fact is that organizational forms and practices are integrally linked to the revolutionary character of the Party. The Party has to move with a single purpose politically. It has to preserve and protect its ideological basis. Lenin stated that the bourgeois State and the ruling classes are constantly trying to disrupt the political-ideological cohesion of the Party and to deflect it to reformist class collaboration. The war of ideas and the ideological struggle hence cannot be conducted effectively by a Party which abandons democratic centralism. Without democratic centralism, the Party would get converted into a discussion forum or a debating society.

Democratic centralism promotes collective decision making and collective activity; it allows for freedom of thought and unity in action.

The following are its features:

- **Political Unity.** Only overall political unity can stimulate individuals to make the commitment necessary to participate in a communist organization, or motivate a minority to subordinate itself to carry out the proposals of the majority. As we argue further in our paper on party building, attempts to enforce organizational consolidation in the absence of political unity on basic tasks can only lead to splits and the proliferation of sterile sects.
- **Cadre Development.** Democratic centralism required that members have a firm, critical, and individual grasp of Marxist theory and practice. If too many members lack these abilities, the party will lack that dialogue between members and leaders.
- **Political Leadership.** Communist leadership had the responsibility of guiding the organization's work through the process of theory-plan-practice-summation. Important at all times, the role of leadership took on particular importance in periods of revolutionary crisis or repression. Its work therefore requires a high degree of theoretical and practical experience and mature political judgment. It requires further an ability to lead, not simply command, the organization, and through it, the masses. Also important is the educational role of leadership in helping to develop new leaders from among the members, and increasing the theoretical and practical capabilities of the membership in general.
- **Criticism and Self-Criticism.** Changing conditions, incorrect political line, and mistakes in implementing line or in style of work are all inevitable and require regular summation and

re-evaluation of work. To make democratic centralism work, criticism and self-criticism must be practiced throughout the organization. Equally important, this dialogue of criticism and self-criticism must be practiced not only within the organization, but between the organization and the masses.

Whereas those parties which abandoned democratic centralism either ceased to be Communist parties or disintegrated. It is the exercise of both centralism and inner-Party democracy that constitutes democratic centralism.

The guiding principles of democratic centralism in the organizational structure of the party, as formulated in the statutes of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union dating from 1961, were:

- (a) Election of all party executive bodies from highest to lowest echelon.
- (b) Periodic accountability of party bodies to their party organizations and to higher bodies.
- (c) Strict party discipline and subordination of the minority to the majority.
- (d) The unconditionally binding nature of the decisions of higher bodies upon lower ones.
- (e) All Party committees shall periodically report their work to the Party organisation immediately below and all lower committees shall likewise report to their immediate higher committee;
- (f) All Party committees, particularly the leading Party committees, shall pay constant heed to the opinions and criticism of the lower Party organisations and the rank-and-file Party members.

Criticisms

In the decades since the founding of the Bolshevik Party and of the Comintern, the communist movement has gained enormous experience in applying democratic centralism. However, this practice has been little examined; errors have been persisted in.

Democratic centralism is accused of creating a hierarchical, centralized structure which stifles democracy and democratic functioning. The party members and cadres are to carry out the directives of the Central Committee. Contrary or dissenting views have no place to be heard or considered.

A party based on democratic centralism enables the party leadership to disregard the opinion of the party as a whole. This creates a barrier between the people and the Party. It prevents correction of a wrong position in time due to barrier in communication.

For example, substantive political discussion in many parties takes place only at the party's highest levels. While disagreements may exist in top leadership bodies, they remain unknown to the membership since the minority is forbidden to take its case to the members. Hence party

congresses, which should be forums for consideration of minority reports, become instead dull, rubber-stamp affairs without political significance. The party congress becomes effectively subordinated to the leadership, even though in democratic centralist theory it should be the highest party authority, the means through which leaders can be held accountable by the members. The

Democratic centralism is also held responsible for stifling creative thinking and development of Marxist theory. The top bodies of the party set out theory and it becomes a closed system which precludes any fresh thinking or absorbing new developments.

Concluding Remarks

Despite its criticisms there are various reasons given supporting the democratic centralism theory in a communist structure.

1. For a party which sets out a strategy for a revolution and bases its tactics on such a revolutionary strategy, the principle of democratic centralism is essential for its organisation.
2. Wrong ideological understanding and incorrect strategy and tactics can adversely affect the communist party organization.
3. Democratic centralism is the organizational principle for a Party based on the Marxist outlook. But there cannot be one single formula of democratic centralism for all times and all parties. They will vary according to conditions in which parties are working and the practice may vary during different periods of a single party.
4. There can be no fixed ratio of centralism and democracy in democratic centralism. When the party is formulating its policies, at the time of conferences etc., there will be democracy in action, free discussions within the party forums. Once a call for action is given, the aspect of centralism will predominate. When the party subjects its actions to self-critical review, democracy will assert itself again.
5. The practice of democratic centralism is not determined by the formal principles and rules. It depends on the ideological political level of the Party members, the concrete conditions and political situation in a country, the authority of the leadership and the experience gained in building the organization through struggles and tackling inner-Party contradictions.