



Lenin and the Bolsheviks

Forging the weapon

In discussions about the best form of organisation for a Marxist workers' party reference is often made, in one spirit or another, to the experience of Russia. Sometimes such reference is made confusedly. Three distinct entities are mixed up; the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party of 1903-11, within which various factions strove for ascendancy; the Bolshevik faction in that 'Party'; and the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party (Bolsheviks) formed in 1912. Often misunderstood, also are the two fundamental presuppositions made by Bolsheviks in their approach to organisational problems.

The first of these was that the working class would have to undertake a struggle for power in which both legal and illegal activity would be involved, a struggle in which all kinds of persecution by the ruling class would have to be faced, a struggle which must culminate in the forcible seizure of power and the forcible defence of the power thus seized against counter-attack. In a word, the Bolsheviks saw before them, and before the workers of every country the prospect of *revolution*, and therefore the need for a party capable of preparing the carrying through of a revolution. The *special* features of Tsarist Russia in the early twentieth century were not decisive in relation to *this* point; in any case, these features fluctuated and changed, and the Bolsheviks' concrete ideas about party organisation in Russia were modified accordingly, but without the fundamental principle being affected.

The second presupposition was that the working class everywhere needs not less but *much more* 'party organisation' in order to conquer power than was needed by the bourgeoisie in its great revolutions of the 17th and 18th centuries. Trotsky (who arrived late at an understanding of this point but thereafter defended the Bolshevik position most staunchly) put it thus in his *Lessons of October* (1924): 'the part played in bourgeois revolutions by the economic power of the bourgeoisie, by its education, by its municipalities and universities, is a part which can be filled in a proletarian revolution only by the party of the proletariat'. That is to say, the bourgeoisie while still an oppressed class acquires wealth, and important footholds in the institutions of the old regime, but the working class lacks these advantages and has to compensate by intense organisation of those forces which it does possess. In Lenin's words, 'in its struggle for power the proletariat has no other weapon but organisation'.

When the Russian Marxists were still operating through the rudimentary forms of study-circles living separate lives in the principal cities, and just beginning to apply themselves to study of the detailed problems of their actual setting and to intervention through leaflets in the current

Where the socialist parties of Western Europe either betrayed socialism, or led the workers to defeat, Lenin's party stood out against the wave of chauvinism which engulfed socialism at the outbreak of the 1914 war. In 1917 it led the Russian workers to the conquest of power. Without the Bolshevik party there would have been no Russian revolution. 70 years later, Bolshevism is shrouded in myth and controversy, claimed as political model and guide by vastly divergent political movements. Here we print the first part of an account of the history of the Bolshevik party by Brian Pearce. It was first published at the beginning of 1960 in the journal 'Labour Review'. The second part will appear in the next issue of Workers' Liberty.



struggles of the Russian workers, Lenin raised (in 1894) the question of working towards the formation of a 'socialist workers' party'. The first coming together of representatives of local 'Leagues of Struggle for the Emancipation of the Working Class', at Minsk in 1898, the so-called First Congress of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party, achieved nothing in the organisational sphere and was followed by arrests and police repressions of a devastating character. Preparations for another, similar gathering, led to further arrests, and drew from Lenin in 1900 the observation that 'congresses inside autocratic Russia are a luxury we can't afford'. Instead, he and his associates got down to the publication outside Russia of a newspaper, *Iskra*, to be smuggled into the country and serve as the means to prepare for another congress. Around the work for this paper, cadres of revolutionaries organised themselves in an all-Russia network, and through this paper a clarifying discussion was carried on for two years about the political tasks and functions of the party to be created.

Already before the Second Congress met, Lenin had outlined, particularly in *Letter to a Comrade on Our Organisational Tasks* (1902), as well as in the more famous *What Is To Be Done?* his conception of what a revolutionary party must be like. Its dominant characteristic should be *centralism*, the concentration in the hands

of a stable, continuing leadership of all the resources of the Marxist movement, so that the most rational and expedient use might be made of these resources. Party membership must be strictly defined so that the leadership knew exactly who was who and what forces they possessed at any given moment. In the *then* existing conditions there could be little *democracy* in the party, desirable as this was, without oversimplifying the task of the police. The local 'committees' of the party would have to be appointed from above and consist entirely of professional revolutionaries, and each of the party organisations in the factories and elsewhere ('every factory must be our fortress') would operate under the instructions of the local committee, conveyed through one of the committee members who would be the organisation's only contact, for security reasons.

When at last the Second Congress met, in 1903 (at first in Brussels, later moving to London), and got down to settling organisational as well as political problems, the political differences among the Russian Marxists arising from their different estimates of the course of development and relationship of class forces at once found reflexion in the sphere of organisation, though not in a clear-cut way, there being at this stage much cross-voting. Lenin and Martov confronted each other with their opposing formulae for Rule One, defining what constituted Party membership. Lenin wanted a tight definition obliging members not merely to acceptance of the Party programme and the giving of financial support, but also to 'personal participation in one of the Party's organisations', whereas the Congress agreed with Martov that the rendering of 'personal assistance under the direction of one of the Party's organs' was sufficient.

In Lenin's difference with Martov on this point was expressed Lenin's conviction that 'the party, as the vanguard of the class, should be as *organised* as possible, should admit to its ranks only such elements as lend themselves to at least a minimum of organisation', because, 'the stronger the party organs consisting of real Social-Democrats are, the less instability there is within the party, the greater will be its influence on the masses around it'. Connected with the divergence of views about what should constitute Party membership was a more fundamen-



tal difference — which was to emerge more and more clearly in subsequent years — about the character of the party structure. Lenin's conception was one of 'building the party from the top downwards, starting from the party congress and the bodies set up by it', which should be possessed of full powers, with 'subordination of lower party bodies to higher party bodies'. Martov revealed already at this stage a conception of each party organisation as being 'autonomous'. On the internal political life of the party Lenin's view was that 'a struggle of shades is inevitable and essential as long as it does not lead to anarchy and splits, as long as it is confined within bounds approved by the common consent of all party members' (*One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*, 1904).

In spite of the defeat of Rule One, Lenin and his associates carried the majority with them in the voting on the main political questions (as a result of which they thereafter enjoyed the advantage in the party of the nickname of *Bolsheviks* 'majority-ites'), but the deep divergences which had revealed themselves were reflected in the Congress decisions on the central party bodies. A sort of dual power was set up, equal authority being accorded to the editorial board of the paper *Iskra*, residing abroad, and to the Central Committee, operating 'underground' inside Russia. A Party Council empowered to arbitrate in any disputes that might arise between these two centres of authority, was to consist of two members representing the editorial board, two from the Central Committee, and one elected directly by the party congress.

At first the Bolsheviks appeared to dominate both editorial board and Central Committee, but very soon after the Second Congress a shift of allegiance by a few of the leaders of what was then a very small group of people enabled the *Mensheviks* ('minority-ites') to turn the tables. The Bolsheviks mustered their forces into a faction, set up a 'Bureau of the Committees of the Majority' to lead it, produced a faction paper, *Vperyod*, and conducted a campaign within the party for the convening of a fresh, Third Congress. By early 1905 they had the majority of the local Committees on record in favour of such a congress, and according to the party rules adopted in 1903 the Party Council should thereupon have convened the congress, but the Mensheviks in control of that body found pretexts not to do so. Accordingly the 'Bureau of the Committees of the Majority' went ahead and convened the Third Congress on its own initiative.

This purely Bolshevik gathering decided to abolish the 'bi-centrism' established in 1903. The editorial board of the party paper had proved to be unstable, while the party organisations inside Russia had grown and become strong. A central committee with full, exclusive powers, including the power to appoint the editorial board, was elected. All party organisations were instructed henceforth to submit

fortnightly reports to the central committee: 'later on it will be seen how enormously important it is to acquire the habit of regular organisational communication'. As regards the Mensheviks, their right and that of all minorities to publish their own literature within the party was recognised, but they must submit to the discipline of the Congress and the Central Committee elected by it. A special resolution charged all party members to 'wage an energetic ideological struggle' against Menshevism, while at the same time acknowledging that the latter's adherents could 'participate in party organisations provided they recognize party congresses and the party rules and submit to party discipline'. Party organisations where Mensheviks were predominant were to be expelled *only* if they were 'unwilling to submit to party discipline'.

The Mensheviks refused to recognise the authenticity of the Third Congress and held a parallel congress of their own, which set up a rival leading body called the Organisational Committee. To this they accorded only vague and limited powers, and they introduced some ultra-democratic provisions into party life, such as that every member of a local organisation was to be asked to express an opinion on every decision of the appropriate local committee before this could be put into force.

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With the revolutionary events of 1905 the situation in and around the party changed very rapidly. Great numbers of workers joined its ranks, the opportunities for party work became greater and more diverse, and *de facto* civil liberty expanded, enabling the party to show itself more openly. Lenin led the way in carrying through a reorganisation of the party on more democratic lines, so as to meet and profit by the new situation. Larger and looser party organisations were to be created, and the elective principle introduced in place of the old tutelage by committees of professionals.

Such changes were possible, Lenin stressed, only because of the work done in the preceding phase. 'The working class is instinctively, spontaneously, social-democratic, and the more than ten years of work put in by the social-democrats has done a great deal to transform this spontaneity into class consciousness.' (The latter part of this sentence from Lenin's arti-

cle on *The Reorganisation of the Party*, November 1905, is sometimes omitted when it is quoted by unscrupulous anti-Leninists). There need be no fear that the mass of new members would dilute the party, *because* they would find themselves under the influence of the 'steadfast, solid core' of party members forged in those previous ten years. At the same time there could be no question of liquidating the secret apparatus the party prepared for illegality; and in general, Lenin warned, it was necessary to 'reckon with the possibility of new attempts on the part of the expiring autocracy to withdraw the promised liberties, to attack the revolutionary workers and especially their leaders'. It was to the important but carefully-considered changes made at this time that Lenin was mainly referring when he wrote in 1913 (*How Vera Zasulich Slays Liquidationism*) that, organisationally, the party, 'while retaining its fundamental character, has known how to adapt its *form* to changing conditions, to change this *form* in accordance with the demands of the moment'.

The newly-recruited worker-members showed themselves somewhat more resistant to the guiding influence of the old cadres than Lenin had hoped, and, unable to grasp what all the 'fuss' was about between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, brought strong pressure to bear for immediate reunification of the party. The very successes achieved by the revolution, with such comparative ease, caused many workers to see the Bolsheviks as gloomy, peculiar folk obsessed with non-existent problems. Zinoviev recalls in his lectures on party history how there was a period in those days when Bolshevik speakers found it hard to get a hearing in the Petersburg factory district called 'the Vyborg side' of the River Neva — which was to become a Bolshevik stronghold in 1917. It proved impossible not to yield to the pressure from below for 'unity', in spite of prophetic misgivings. A joint central committee was set up, composed of both Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, and proceeded to convene a new party congress.

This congress — the Fourth, or 'Unity' congress, held at Stockholm — was elected more democratically than its predecessors, full advantage being taken of the easier conditions for open activity. Thirty-six thousand members took part in the election of the delegates, and one delegate was elected for every 250-300 members — really elected, by the rank and file, not, as on previous occasions, chosen by the local committees of professionals.

As a result, the Mensheviks found themselves with a majority on the most important political questions — though they were obliged to accept Lenin's formulation of the rule regarding party membership which they had successfully voted down in 1903! A central committee consisting of six Mensheviks and three Bolsheviks was elected.