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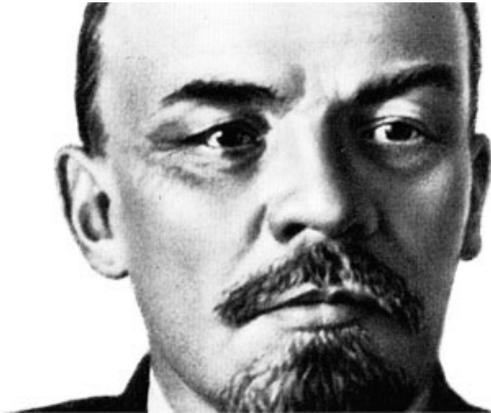
Party & Programme -> Bolshevism

Thursday April 05 2012

Weekly Worker 908

1912 and 2012

Paul Le Blanc argues that the Bolsheviks constituted themselves as a separate party at the Prague conference and advocates a 'united front' for today's disunited Marxist left



Lenin united with pro-party Mensheviks at Prague

I would like to respond to two problematical contentions advanced by Pham Binh in his article 'Wanting to get Lenin wrong' (*Weekly Worker* March 29). One of these contentions is about my motivation for disagreeing with his interpretation of Lenin's thought, and the other has to do with a historical question - when the Bolsheviks became a separate party. This is part of an extended debate having to do with history and politics (Lenin and the Bolsheviks; tasks facing socialists today). My own contributions touching on these questions can be found at <http://links.org.au/taxonomy/term/579>.

Firstly, Pham has yet again tagged me as "a defender of Tony Cliff". In my opinion - stated quite explicitly in a previous contribution - *Tony Cliff is not the issue*. I share the view of Lars T Lih, Paul D'Amato and others that aspects of Pham's attack on Cliff are unfair, but I had no interest in entering this debate as "a defender of Tony Cliff". That Pham chooses to insist otherwise has more to do with his fixation than with my motivation.

I have based neither my own interpretation of Lenin nor my criticism of Pham on Cliff's writings. I have indicated this more than once, in articles appearing in *Historical Materialism* and *Links*. This should also be evident from a careful reading of my book, *Lenin and the revolutionary party*. I was motivated to disagree with Pham's

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interpretation of Lenin and the Bolsheviks because I think it is based on factual errors and faulty analysis, independently of anything that Tony Cliff has written.

Secondly, while I have expressed my own disagreements with aspects of Cliff's interpretation of Lenin's thought (especially with the way he deals with Lenin's 1902 polemic, *What is to be done?*), I do believe that Cliff is closer to the truth than Pham regarding when the Bolsheviks became a separate party. Pham says it happened at some unspecified time in 1917 - though he acknowledges that he is at a loss about precisely when this happened (telling us it was "more like balding than a divorce"). Cliff says it happened in 1912, and for all practical purposes he is right.

Pham is basing himself on what seems to me a misreading of Lars Lih's criticism of another historian, Carter Elwood. At issue was a January 1912 conference in Prague of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) organised by Lenin and other Bolsheviks close to him. There are actually three parts to Elwood's position:

1. the Bolsheviks became a separate party in 1912 based on what happened at the Prague conference;
2. this was what Lenin set out to accomplish;
3. Lenin was able to accomplish this only by lying about what he was actually doing.

Lars strongly argues against point 3 and raises questions about point 2. So far as I am aware, in his critique of Elwood, he does not argue against point 1. There is much evidence in Lenin's writings (two of which are included in the Pluto Press selection that I edited, *Revolution, democracy, socialism*) and in the writings of others from that period that the Prague conference actually *did* result in an independent Bolshevik party.

Martov and other Mensheviks, and Trotsky as well, by denouncing and rejecting the Prague conference (and instead organising an RSDLP conference of their own in Vienna in August 1912 - the so-called August Bloc), may be partly responsible for the actual outcome. Lenin may have hoped these comrades would behave differently, without necessarily expecting them to. The door was open for them to become part of the version of the RSDLP that emerged from the Prague conference. But, given the dynamics of their own politics and the overall situation, they could not go through that door. Lenin and his Bolshevik co-thinkers went forward anyway.

This does not invalidate Lih's argument (with which I basically agree): Lenin was fairly open about what he was doing, and he did not lie. It does run counter to Pham's assertion, however, that the Bolsheviks did not become a distinct party in 1912, as a result of the Prague conference, but instead crystallised at some undefined time in 1917.

Pham says it was important that "the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks were part of the same broad, multi-tendency party from 1903 until 1917" and today socialist groups should likewise, in his opinion: join together into a multi-tendency organisation. It is not necessary, however, to minimise the meaning of the 1912 Prague conference to make such an argument. Nor is it clear that the "broad, multi-tendency" RSDLP is the best model for genuine socialist unity.

Even when the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks were actually part of the same RSDLP for the period that we agree they were (1903 to 1912), they seemed to function as incredibly hardened factions: separate newspapers; divergent strategies which they worked - separately - to

implement; separate delegations in the duma; separate factional conferences; separate funds; separate leadership bodies; etc. I would be surprised if this is the kind of "socialist unity" that Pham is actually advocating for our own time. I think it might be more fruitful to reach for practical unity among revolutionary socialists - perhaps at some point leading to organisational unity - through working together in united-front efforts in the struggles of today.



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