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Both Pham Binh and Paul Le Blanc are wrong

The left has never properly grasped the history and significance of Bolshevism, argues Mike Macnair



The left: useless sects and unprincipled front politics

The debate on Tony Cliff's *Lenin* (volume 1: *Building the party*) and on the significance of 1912 in the history of Bolshevism, rumbles on. This contribution should be read in conjunction with Paul Le Blanc's response, published in this issue, to Pham Binh's piece in last week's paper.

The *Weekly Worker* editors cut Pham Binh's piece substantially; the full text, 'Over a Cliff and into Occupy with Lenin', is available on Louis Proyect's blog.^[1] Our cuts were partly for space reasons, but also partly political. The larger part of what we cut from Pham Binh's article is directed to arguing that the 'Occupy' movement represented the 21st century equivalent of Bolshevism.

Our front-page story last week was Jim Creegan's very much more cautious assessment of the partial convergence and partial conflict between 'Occupy Oakland' and organised labour in the form of the International Longshore Workers' Union. Comrade Creegan does not speak for the CPGB, but the editors' view was that what he had to say was closer to the politics we want to promote than are comrade Binh, who tends to idolise the 'Occupy' movement.

The question is not just one of US left politics, any more than it is just one of the history of the workers' movement. Comrade Le Blanc's piece draws out a political question which is fundamental for the left. Should we aim in the short term for a "multi-tendency" party with - if

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necessary - *open* factions with their own press and organisation? Or is the better approach, as Le Blanc argues and as Alex Callinicos has argued in the past, “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” (emphasis added)? Le Blanc has argued this view at more length in a separate article in the Australian Democratic Socialist Organisation’s *Links* journal.^[2] This aspect of the debate was absent from James Turley’s intervention two weeks ago.^[3]

The problem of 1912 in this context is that comrade Le Blanc and others make a myth of that year as the moment at which Bolsheviks and Mensheviks became two *parties*, rather than two *public factions*, to substitute for the old myth of 1903 as the moment of the ‘real’ or ‘decisive’ split. The reasons for the myth are partly discussed in comrade Turley’s article. But doing so obscures what 1912 was in reality about: the choice between, on the one hand, the line of the Bolsheviks and the pro-party Mensheviks led by Plekhanov and, on the other, that of the ‘liquidators’ who argued for the replacement of the illegal party, with its ‘sectarian’ commitments to the overthrow of the regime, by a broad-front party focused on ‘the struggles of today’.

Unity

The CPGB has fought in the short term for the unity of the Marxist left in a common party, on the basis of a platform for common action, which includes at the most fundamental level:

- the ideas of working class political independence under capitalism and of the goal of working class rule, as opposed to various forms of the idea of the people’s front;
- the international unity of the working class, as opposed to various forms of left nationalism;
- radical democracy both in the state (as opposed to the various monarchies, presidencies, sovereign supreme courts, and so on) and in the workers’ movement (as opposed to the dictatorship of the trade union bureaucracies and the party bureaucracies big and small).

The last of these points necessarily implies fighting for a party which *can* have public organised factions with - if necessary - their own press and organisation; though we argue that it is *preferable* for the disputes within the party to be fully ventilated in public in the party’s common press.

The internal debates, disputes and nuances of opinion within the party are, in our view, the *common property* of the militants who read the party press and eventually of the working class as a whole. It is through - as far as possible - participating in these debates, and through the broadest possible democratic self-organisation, that the working class develops itself as a potential ruling class. Hence the party has no right to privacy from the class and the leading committees have no right to privacy from the party.

‘Multi-tendency party’

What I have just said, however, is *not* what is meant by Pham Binh when he argues for a ‘multi-tendency party’ - as can be seen from the arguments idolising ‘Occupy’ which we did not publish. Nor is it what is meant by a “multi-tendency party” by Louis Proyect, who has broadly backed Pham Binh against the comrades from the International

Socialist Organisation,^[4] or by the Mandeliste Fourth International in their arguments with the British Socialist Workers Party over this issue over the last 15-20 years.

For these comrades the practical meaning of a “multi-tendency party” is one which unites ‘revolutionaries’ (understood *not* as advocates of the overthrow of the constitution and the creation of working class rule - peacefully if we can, forcibly if we must - but as advocates of the mass-struggle ‘revolutionary rupture’) with ‘reformists’ - a category very difficult to identify at the present date, but which certainly includes left nationalists, people’s frontists and supporters of the organisational forms of the dictatorship of the bureaucracy in the workers’ movement.

Our conception does not exclude the possibility of the participation of ‘reformists’ in this sense, or even ‘reformist’ factions, in a unified communist party. The question is, *on what terms?* From the beginning of the development of reformism, the reformists have wanted to insist that unity is only possible if *they are in control*: that is, that the party make no public commitments inconsistent with their projects, that they control the leadership, and that those to their left (if they are to be permitted to organise at all) use diplomatic language towards them. The policy began with the (originally unsuccessful) efforts of the right to stifle Marxist criticism in the precursor of the German Social Democratic Party in the 1880s.^[5]

Unity on the reformists’ terms has, in reality, been the character of many “multi-tendency” parties - like Rifondazione Comunista in Italy, like the Brazilian Workers’ Party. In the case of the Scottish Socialist Party it involved Trotskyists *pretending to be* reformists (and in the process *becoming* left nationalists). Through the mechanism of ‘consensus’ it was the character of the World and European Social Forums. Its effect is - if you actually comply with the principle - to silence the argument for anything beyond what the reformists are willing to see argued.

The fate of these projects has been diverse, but largely negative. The Brazilian Workers’ Party became merely a participant in the dance of Brazilian clientelist bourgeois politics - at best an equivalent of the British Labour Party. Rifondazione blew up over real political issues - participation in a government which was, in turn, participating in the imperialist war in Afghanistan - and collapsed. The SSP split and collapsed for reasons which at first sight appear completely apolitical, but in reality reflect its leaders’ decision to play the bourgeois political game - on the one hand by building a personality cult of Tommy Sheridan; on the other by adopting *statist* policies on prostitution which turned Sheridan’s personal life into a point of political weakness.

Meanwhile, the anarchists and semi-anarchists episodically reinvent the square wheel of ‘direct action’ coupled with the ‘tyranny of structurelessness’: producing, as they have always produced, ephemeral spectacles which draw in wider forces briefly, but evaporate quickly; groups of semi-terrorist provocateurs heavily infiltrated by the police and used by them to make the state appear more attractive than the mass movement (‘black bloc’, etc), and longer lasting micro-groups even more fissile than the Marxist left.

The underlying problem is the extreme fragmentation of the Marxist left, our refusal to unify *as Marxists* and our repeated hopes that this or that small group in isolation can ‘catch the tide’ of this or that ‘left reformist’ or ‘mass movement’ and outgrow its small-group rivals so as to marginalise them. This prevents any group having sufficient

organised weight and credibility as an alternative to be able even to negotiate *partial* unity with the left reformists (united fronts) on anything but the reformists' terms - which silence the political alternative to reformism.

The problem is exacerbated by and interlinked with the fact that the far left's organisational forms are commonly - to be frank - less democratic than the Chinese Communist Party's. In the first place, who on earth not blinded by the cult of the personality of Lenin (or of Cliff, or whoever) would imagine that a group whose leadership remains stable in an individual or a very few individuals for decades is the political representative of a future democracy? Second and equally important, the regime of *secret internal* discussion and monolithic external unity produces and reproduces split after split.

In other words, the *recent* history suggests that *both* Pham Binh *and* Paul Le Blanc are wrong about 21st century politics. Pham Binh is wrong because the 'broad movement' or 'broad party' conception *without solving the problem of unity of the Marxists* does not work as anything other than a form of process by which dissent is recuperated into the bourgeois political game.

Paul Le Blanc is wrong because the idea of the left groups cooperating through 'united front' policy is both a diluted form of the 'broad movement' policy *and* fails to get to grips with the problem of the dictatorship of the labour bureaucracy of the small groups.

Witness what has become of the British SWP's 'united front' orientation, argued by Alex Callinicos against the Mandelites as comrade Le Blanc now argues it against the 'Occupy' enthusiasts: from the SWP suppressing their own ideas for the sake of unity in Respect, to splitting Respect on a totally unprincipled basis, producing small splits in their own organisation on an equally unprincipled basis, and substituting mere SWP fronts which pretend to unity while actually displaying *disunity*.

History

We argue about history in this context for two reasons. The first is indicated by what I have just said, which concerns the *recent* history from the 1990s up to the present day. In this sense we cannot avoid talking about history: *all* arguments about what might work in the future are drawn from what we believe happened in the past. This is true even where, as in the physical sciences, 'what happened in the past' means tightly controlled experiments; and even where, in everyday life, what is involved is trivial ideas like 'the sun will rise tomorrow' (because it routinely has in the past) or 'if I don't put my foot on the brake I will run into the car ahead of me'. In this sense, anyone who argues that we should *not* talk about history when deciding what to do in the future is either a fool or a liar.

More narrowly, we argue about the history of Bolshevism because our common project is in a very basic sense for the working class to take over running the society. And in October 1917 a coalition of workers' parties and organisations *did* oust the political representatives of the capitalist class from power in Russia and create a new constitutional order which aimed to be the frame of the class rule of the working class.

How long workers' power survived in Soviet Russia is a matter of debate: for anarchists and 'council' communists it was at best very brief, for Trotskyists and 'left' communists it lasted into the 1920s before succumbing to a 'counterrevolution within the revolution'; 'official' communists from the 1930s characterised the regime as

'socialism' as *distinct from* workers' power, and on their terms this 'socialism' lasted till 1991; for Maoists 'socialism' in the USSR was overthrown by the Khrushchev administration in the 1950s. But on any argument except that of the full anarchists, workers' power in Russia lasted longer than the Paris Commune or other workers' uprisings.

Meanwhile, there were widespread revolutionary movements of the working class in far more countries in 1918-20, most notably in Germany, Austria, Hungary and Italy; and all these movements ended in defeat.^[6]

Hence, we argue about the history of Bolshevism in order to draw lessons from it about what might work in the future.

Leftwing communism

The beginning of this sort of argument was when, in the year 1920, Lenin wrote his pamphlet *Leftwing communism: an infantile disorder*.

^[7] This was part of a polemic in the Communist International with what became the left and council communist tendencies. The actual line Lenin defended in this pamphlet was in substance completely orthodox Bebel and pre-1914 Kautsky, and common ground between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks (except the liquidators) until 1914. But to say so would have cut no ice: Kautsky had gone over to the right, and among the principal leaders of the 'lefts' were Herman Gorter and Antonie Pannekoek, who had polemicised against Kautsky on just these issues in 1910-12.

Lenin therefore *tactically represented* the line he was arguing as the result of the long experience of the history of the Bolshevik Party, which had succeeded in making the revolution in 1917 where the western left had failed in 1918-20, as opposed to the limited party experience of the western left (hence 'infantile disorder,' meaning 'childhood disease'). In the process he *rewrote* the history of Russian social democracy before 1917 so as to *write back* the independent party existence of the Bolsheviks all the way to 1903.

The new history of Bolshevism, and the idea that the left worldwide had to learn from the uniquely successful experience of Bolshevism, rapidly became orthodoxy. It is reflected in Grigory Zinoviev's 1923 *History of the Bolshevik Party*.^[8] It is reflected, unsurprisingly, in Stalin's *History of the CPSU(B) (short course)*.^[9] And it is also reflected in Trotsky's writings, where he refers to the history of Bolshevism, following from his sharply self-critical attitude in the 1930s to his own conduct and views on the party question before 1917. There are only a few limited exceptions where he polemicises directly with the CPSU leadership majority's, and later Stalinist, attacks on his history. It is, therefore, unsurprising that Cliff's *Building the party* uses the same general framework.

Because the version in *Leftwing communism* rapidly became an orthodoxy, the result is that if it is unreliable, *all witnesses producing after 1920 recollections of earlier events*, who may have been influenced by *Leftwing communism*, are also unreliable. This is not only (obviously) true of Bolsheviks, but also of (for example) Menshevik witnesses, who rapidly adopted the 1920 narrative in support of the idea that Lenin had always been an unprincipled power-seeker and manoeuvrer. From these sources the version of the cold war academy was shaped. For some people the adoption of this narrative was clearly cynical; for others, however, it seems to have been a 'false memory syndrome' resulting from reinterpreting

the past through 1920 eyes.

In what I have said so far I *de facto* assume that the *Leftwing communism* narrative is unreliable. This point is, in fact, not difficult. Its unreliability is visible from comrade Le Blanc's own *Lenin and the revolutionary party* (1990), or from any systematic reading of the relevant volumes of Lenin's *Collected works*, or of the RSDLP congress and conference resolutions of the period.^[10] When comrade Le Blanc argues, as he does here, that 1912 was the beginning of an independent Bolshevik Party, he is *already* contradicting Lenin's 1920 narrative. It is a valuable bonus, but not strictly essential, that the unreliability of the *Leftwing communism* narrative is strongly confirmed by Lars Lih's scholarly work in the Russian-language sources.

It follows, then, that the left is still required to ask questions about the ingredients of Bolshevik success and the failure of the western socialist movement in 1917-20; but also that we have to ask these questions *without* the framework of Lenin's *Leftwing communism* narrative of the history of Bolshevism.

Two questions

There are two modern questions at issue; and 1912 is relevant to only one of them.

The first question is the viability of a party which conducts its debates in the open and has, where necessary, public organised factions. 1912 is quite irrelevant to this. The reason is that it is perfectly clear that, whether they were a separate party or not, the Bolsheviks continued to conduct their internal debates in public *into and after* 1917.

Witness, for example, the debate over policy towards the provisional government, of which Lenin's *April theses* were part: conducted in the public press of the all-Russian central committee on one side, and of the Vyborg district committee on the other. Witness the refusal of the Bolshevik CC in November 1917 (overriding Lenin) to expel Zinoviev and Kamenev for carrying their opposition to the seizure of power into the *bourgeois* press. Witness the left communists in the debate over Brest-Litovsk in 1918. Indeed, even after the 1921 ban on factions, a good deal of the debates of the 1920s were carried on in the public press.

In rejecting public debate of internally disputed issues, the Trotskyist left has, in fact, adopted a norm of *Stalinism*. In doing so, since the Trotskyists do not have a state to give them financial backing and global credibility, or a secret police to marginalise dissent, they have committed themselves to a 'party' form which *cannot* sink real roots in the working class or get beyond a few thousand members.

The second question is the basis of worthwhile unity. To this question 1912 *is* relevant; but it has to be placed in a degree of context.

In the 1890s and early 1900s the SPD and Second International were vigorously promoting the idea that broad-based unity of the socialists could provide the basis of a breakthrough - as the 1875 Gotha unification had provided the basis of the SPD's breakthrough.

Its should be emphasised that - contrary to a common view on the far left - the SPD itself, and the unitary parties it supported, were *not* conceived as 'parties of the whole class', but as organised parties founded on a definite political programme, of the general character of the SPD's *Erfurt programme*. The anarchists had been excluded from

the Second International in 1896.

One of the products of this unity policy was the 1903 attempt to unify the divided Russian left in the form of a second congress of the stillborn RSDLP, founded in 1898. The planned 1903 party had the same character as the SDP's other unity projects: it was to be based on a programme and included advocates of working class power, *not* the whole of the Russian socialist left - which included the Social Revolutionaries and their peasant-based socialism.

In fact, the 1903 Congress produced a new split, with both sides claiming to be the 'real' party, though the Bolsheviks had a majority of the delegates - hence their name: 'Majorityites'. The split issue was whether the congress majority was entitled to remove long-standing members of the editorial board of the newspaper *Iskra*.

The subsequent history included independent action of the two factions in 1905; reunification in 1906, continued into 1907; a new debate on participation in the elections for the third duma on a restricted franchise which separated, on the one side, the Mensheviks and Lenin and his immediate supporters from, on the other side, the 'Otzovists' and similar factions - mostly drawn from the ranks and leaders of the Bolsheviks - who argued for a boycott tactic. This led to a formal split in the Bolshevik faction and the constitution of the *Vperyod* group in 1909-10.

Meanwhile, a section of the Mensheviks began to argue that the right solution was to dissolve the illegal party and build a broad labour party not based on a definite programme, but committed to legality. These were the 'liquidators'.

Lenin and his wing of the Bolsheviks continued his bloc with the Plekhanov group among the Mensheviks, which had initially developed in the struggle against *Vperyod*, into calling the Prague conference of the RSDLP in 1912. The idea of the Prague conference was to reconstitute the RSDLP organisation, and to do *without the liquidators*. Far more detail can be found in Lars Lih's February 16 *Weekly Worker* supplement. As he points out, of only 14 delegates at the conference - a small number - two were Mensheviks: a minority, but definitely not a trivial one.

Other Mensheviks and the national-minority parties rejected the 1912 conference, and formed various alternative organisations. The RSDLP constituted at Prague and its rivals contested the 1912 fourth duma elections separately, and the 'Prague RSDLP' had considerably more success. The period 1912-14 was one of limited political opening and a rise in the direct class struggle, and in this context the 'Prague RSDLP' grew and sank roots rapidly, while the rival groups tended to break up into their component parts.

The 1912 bloc, however, was broken up when on the outbreak of war Plekhanov took a social-chauvinist line and in doing so joined up with the *right* wing of those who had boycotted 1912 - and this new formation obtained, as war supporters, a degree of legality denied to both Bolshevik and other opponents of the war. It was 1914 which in this way created the 'Mensheviks', 'Bolsheviks' and *Mezhrayontsi* (non-faction anti-war social democrats) who went into 1917.

Although this is an obscure history of manoeuvres among émigrés and their supporters within Russia, both 1903 and 1912 display real underlying political issues which are still relevant today. In essence, they are about the question I have discussed above: unity *on whose terms?*

The Mensheviks in 1903 lost the vote on the question of the editorial

board, and walked out in order to deny the congress decision legitimacy. The question here is: is the *right* of long-standing leaders to continue as leaders to override majority decision-making?

In 1912 the question was: should the illegal party be revived on the basis of its existing programme, or a new broad-front party (perhaps a 'multi-tendency party') created on the basis of nothing but a commitment to legality?

The curious paradox about 1912 and 2012 is thus that the large majority of today's far left, while defending Stalinist organisational norms on the basis of variant forms of the myth of Bolshevik history created in 1920, defend the *actual politics* of the liquidators: the abandonment of any practical struggle for the fundamentals of Marxism in favour of the constitution of one or another sort of broad-front party. We have to get beyond *both* sides of this politics.

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Notes

1. <http://louisproyect.wordpress.com/2012/03/27/over-a-cliff-and-into-occupy-with-lenin>.
2. 'Revolutionary organisation and the Occupy movement', February 16 2012: <http://links.org.au/node/2749>.
3. 'Fur flies over Lenin' *Weekly Worker* March 22.
4. Various posts at <http://louisproyect.wordpress.com>.
5. This is more clearly brought out by the academic biographers than by more general histories of the SPD: eg, GP Steenson *Karl Kautsky 1854-1938: Marxism in the classical years* (Pittsburgh PA 1978); WH Maehl *August Bebel: shadow emperor of the German workers* (Philadelphia, PA, 1980); RH Dominick III, *Wilhelm Liebknecht and the founding of the German Social Democratic Party* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1982); in all cases references to the SPD right attempting to suppress the public expression of dissent from their ideas are *passim*.
6. The rightwinger A Read's *The world on fire: 1919 and the battle with Bolshevism* (London 2008) in spite of its biases provides the most geographically broad-ranging survey of the high tide of the workers' movement.
7. www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc.
- 8, Translation: London 1973.
9. www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1939/x01/index.htm.
10. Lenin's *Collected works* are available at www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/cw/index.htm; resolutions, etc in RH McNeal (editor) *Resolutions and decisions of the CPSU Vol 1*; R Carter Elwood *The RSDLP 1899-October 1917* Toronto, 1974.

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