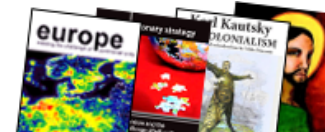




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Thursday June 07 2012

Weekly Worker 917

## Bolshevism and revolutionary social democracy

Lars T Lih completes his series of articles on Lenin's view of the party question by examining the context in 1920 of 'Leftwing' communism



Lenin's pamphlet '*Leftwing' communism* - his last work of more-than-article size - was written in spring 1920 in order to be distributed to the delegates of the 2nd Congress of the Communist International, or Comintern. The message that Lenin intended to send cannot be understood apart from the particular circumstances of this event.

Comintern was founded in spring 1919, a time of great enthusiasm and hope about the possibility of soviet-style revolutions sweeping across Europe. Exuberantly confident predictions were made by Lenin and Grigorii Zinoviev that the 2nd Congress of the new international would be a gathering not just of parties, but of new soviet republics. Accordingly, little attention was given to the party as such. As Trotsky put it later, the hope was that "a chaotic, spontaneous [elemental or *stikhiinyi*] assault" would mount in "ever-rising waves, that in this process the awareness of the leading layers of the working class would become clarified, and that in this way the proletariat would attain state power in the course of one or two years".<sup>[1]</sup>

Only a year later, the hopes for soviet revolution in Europe had receded - as it turned out, for good. In spring 1920, Comintern leaders were still confident that they were on the eve of a new revolutionary crisis. Zinoviev brought up his 1919 prediction that soviet revolutions would triumph in one year, and remarked: well, not one year, but the European revolution would still happen in two or

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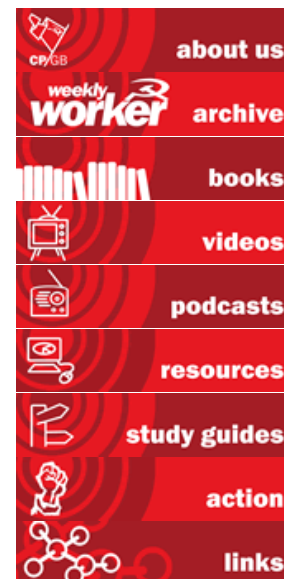
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three years - let the bourgeoisie enjoy their short respite! But the optimism of the 2nd Congress was nevertheless of rather a grim sort.

[2]

In fact, the change in outlook was more than just adding a few years before the expected revolutionary triumph. Bolshevik leaders now realised that, for the time being, Europe had moved *out* of a revolutionary situation and therefore into a phase in which the only useful activity was *preparation* for the next crisis. This new diagnosis was not only presented at the congress, but can be found in Lenin's pamphlet - always, of course, with the most positive possible spin.

The essential feature of the new situation in 1920 was that capitalists were jailing communists and not the other way around. Lenin presented this capitalist repression as the last gasp of a terrified bourgeoisie: "Life will assert itself. Let the bourgeoisie rave, work itself into a frenzy, go to extremes, commit follies, take vengeance on the Bolsheviks in advance and endeavour to kill off (in India, Hungary, Germany, etc) hundreds, thousands, and hundreds of thousands more of yesterday's and tomorrow's Bolsheviks. In acting thus, the bourgeoisie is acting as all classes doomed by history have acted."

Nevertheless, the practical bottom line was: "It is possible that in certain instances, in certain countries, and for more or less brief periods, it will succeed in this [repression]."

Lenin also noted the absence of what for him was a key component of a revolutionary situation (especially well exemplified by Russia in 1917): the inability of the normal elites to rule, because they were overwhelmed by a society-wide crisis of some sort. And an even more crucial marker of a non-revolutionary situation was the mood of the "broad masses", who were (Lenin observed with regret) "now, for the most part, slumbering, apathetic, hidebound, inert and dormant."

Lenin's remark about England thus sums up his attitude to the situation in Europe as a whole: "We cannot tell, and no-one can tell beforehand, how soon the real proletarian revolution will flare up there, and *what* immediate cause will most serve to rouse it, kindle it, and impel very wide masses who are at present dormant into the struggle. Hence it is our duty to carry on our preparatory work in such a way as to be 'well shod on all four feet'."

Given this view on the prevailing non- (and only hopefully pre-) revolutionary situation, the focus was no longer on setting up soviets, but rather on the *party* as a vehicle of revolutionary preparation in a non-revolutionary situation. The question then arises: what kind of party? And Lenin answers: a *Bolshevik*-type party, as opposed to the philistine, opportunist, careerist parties of the pre-war Second International. The rhetorical contrast between these two kinds of party runs through the pamphlet.

Nevertheless, if we want to understand what *type* of party Lenin is advocating, we have to dig deeper than this rhetorical contrast, for a number of reasons. Lenin's rejection of the *actual* parties of the Second International does not mean he is rejecting its *party ideal*. For example, in my writings about pre-war Bolshevism, I often employ the term 'SPD model': that is, the ideal party best exemplified by German Social Democracy. I show that Lenin was directly inspired by the SPD model when he wrote *What is to be done?* in 1902. Some readers have responded to this interpretation by saying: well, although Lenin may well have been inspired by the SPD model in 1902, he obviously became disillusioned with it later on, as shown by his writings after 1914. But this response overlooks the possibility that Lenin rejected the *actual* SPD precisely because it failed to live up to the SPD *model*

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- and indeed I think this is exactly what happened.

Furthermore, the blanket label, 'party of the Second International', overlooks the fundamental fact of the long-standing division within all of these parties between "revolutionary social democracy" and "opportunism". Opportunism won out in the Second International, and therefore Lenin rejects the international as it existed. But this rejection does not mean he is renouncing his long-standing self-identification as a partisan of "revolutionary social democracy".

On the contrary: Lenin goes out of his way in *'Leftwing' communism* to claim that "history has now confirmed on a large, worldwide and historical scale the opinion we have always advocated: that is, that *revolutionary* German social democracy *came closest* to being the party which the revolutionary proletariat required to enable it to attain victory". As the discussion makes clear, Lenin is not choosing sides between Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Kautsky in their disputes after 1909 - rather, he is endorsing the long-term wing of German social democracy for which *both* Luxemburg and Kautsky were the recognised spokespersons up to 1909. (For more on this point, see Lenin's remarks on Kautsky as discussed below.)

Finally, we should note that the main focus in this pamphlet is not 'the party in a revolutionary situation' or, even less, 'the party in power' - topics that underline the contrast with the 'peaceful' pre-war parties - but precisely "the party doing preparatory work in a non-revolutionary situation".

The polemical target of the pamphlet - "leftwing communism" - is defined as the outlook of revolutionary leftists who reject the party in principle at any time. As such, the pamphlet was designed as a contribution to a debate at the Comintern 2nd Congress about "the party principle". A look at this neglected debate provides the essential context for understanding *'Leftwing' communism*.

The purpose of this debate was to reaffirm "the party principle" as such in opposition to the more anarchistic leftists, who were nevertheless seen as valuable additions to the Communist International - *if* they could be taught to see the error of their ways. The Bolshevik leaders were not propagating a "new type of party," as later Stalinist historians had it. They were propagating the party principle *as it had always been understood in the Second International*. Indeed, Zinoviev held up for special ridicule some language used by the 'left' German Communists: we are founding a party (they wrote) but "not a party in the traditional sense". According to Zinoviev, this was "an intellectual capitulation to the views of syndicalism and industrialism that are reactionary".<sup>[3]</sup> This remark of Zinoviev's was incorporated into the official resolution of the congress on the subject - putting the congress on record, as it were, against any talk of a "new type" of party.

Paul Levi (the German communist who was the most important non-Russian delegate to the congress) felt that the whole issue of the party principle was old hat. He objected to "focusing the discussion on a question that the majority of the western European working class settled decades ago". Trotsky objected to Levi's condescension. Now, Trotsky *could* have said something like this: 'Excuse me, but we are *not* advocating the same old party ideal, but rather a new and refurbished one.' In reality, he just defended the anarchist and syndicalist delegates to the Congress as more revolutionary in spirit than many social democrats, even though the latter understood the party principle in theory.

Taking all these factors into consideration, the suspicion arises when

reading *'Leftwing' communism* that Lenin is using the revolutionary prestige of 'Bolshevism' in order to propagate the party principle as such. Of course, Lenin spends more than a few pages going over the history of Bolshevism for the benefit of the foreign comrades. But, when we look closer at this history, we notice that the *specifically Russian* aspects of Bolshevism are missing. Bolshevism arose in Russia primarily as a strategy for an anti-tsarist democratic revolution. According to the Bolsheviks, this revolution would succeed only if the socialist proletariat acted as class leader for the peasantry. This whole scenario is absent from Lenin's historical overview. Indeed, Lenin almost goes out of his way to dismiss the scenario as one that cannot be directly applied to Europe.

Lenin also makes no real attempt to initiate the foreign comrades into the complexities of the factional struggle between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. His lack of interest in this topic can be misunderstood. Lenin writes: "As a trend of political thought and as a political party, Bolshevism exists since 1903." Mike Macnair reads this and similar statements as an historically absurd claim that Bolshevism was already an independent party organisation in 1903.<sup>[4]</sup> I read this particular sentence as saying: Bolshevism has existed since 1903, first as a trend of political thought and later as an independent political party. But Macnair is certainly correct that Lenin uses the word 'party' in a very vague way in his historical excursus, so that the reader gets no idea when, how and why the Bolsheviks moved from "trend of political thought" to "political party".

The reason for this is not that Lenin wants to give a misleading impression about the historical evolution of Bolshevism. *He is simply not interested in this aspect of Bolshevik history.* He is not trying to impress on the foreign comrades the importance of purging the opportunists and moving from factional status to party status. He realises how impossible it would be in a short section to give an adequate picture of the ins and outs of the Russian factional struggle, and he does not try - because his big point is elsewhere.

His big point can be put like this: the 'SPD model' is discredited with some justice because the SPD itself has disgraced itself. Nevertheless, it would be disastrous - especially as we are now in a not-yet-revolutionary situation - to reject the model along with the party. To drive this point home, Lenin shows how the model was incarnated in what everybody admitted was a truly revolutionary party: the Bolsheviks. Thus the 'SPD model' becomes the 'Bolshevik model'. The exemplary incarnation of the model has changed - but has the model itself changed?

### **'Bolshevism' and the party principle**

Throughout *'Leftwing' communism*, Lenin sneers at the parties of the Second International as corrupt and degenerate. The question that interests us is: why does Lenin reject these parties? Because they were inspired by a false ideal of what a party should be? Or because they failed to be sufficiently inspired by their own official party ideal - an ideal that Lenin himself explicitly shared in earlier days? I believe an attentive reading of the pamphlet unambiguously confirms the second alternative.

To make this case, we need a sense of what the official party ideal was. I take the liberty of going back to my study, *Lenin rediscovered*, which is devoted to Lenin's outlook circa 1902. In this study I coined the term 'Erfurtian' to describe the ideal party of 'revolutionary social democracy' - a model that was the basis of the outlook of Russian social democracy. Erfurt was the town where the German Social

Democrats in 1891 held their first party congress after regaining legal status and where they produced the immensely influential Erfurt programme. The influence in Russia of Kautsky's book-length commentary *The Erfurt programme* can hardly be overstated. For all these reasons, 'Erfurtian' seemed an appropriate word to describe the outlook of Russian social democrats such as Lenin.

The essential idea for such a party comes from the work of Marx and Engels. The proletariat has a historical mission to take political power and introduce socialism - but this means that the proletariat must be prepared ideologically and organisationally to carry it out. Thus the historical mission of the party is to provide this preparation - to ensure that the proletariat (to use Marx's own English vocabulary) would be "united by combination and led by knowledge".

This overall conception of the party's mission leaves open the question of the concrete strategy and techniques for carrying it out. These techniques had to be worked out, and here the pivotal figure is Ferdinand Lassalle. Lassalle came up with the idea of a political organisation devoted to carrying out a *permanent campaign* ("legal and peaceful, but unwearying, unceasing agitation") in support of its message. In my view, this project was one of the greatest political innovations of the last century or so, and Lassalle's crucial role in its development has been unjustly overlooked. But I digress. Here I want to bring out the striking unity of tone between Lassalle, writing in the 1860s, and Lenin, writing in 1920.

Lassalle: "Found and publish newspapers, to make this demand [universal suffrage] daily and to prove the reasons for it from the state of society. With the same funds circulate pamphlets for the same purpose. Pay agents out of the union's funds to carry this insight into every corner of the country, to thrill the heart of every worker, every house-servant, every farm-labourer, with this cry ... Propagate this cry in every workshop, every village, every hut. May the workers of the towns let their higher insight and education overflow on to the workers of the country. Debate, discuss, everywhere, every day without pausing, without ending."<sup>[5]</sup>

Lenin: "The communist parties must issue their slogans; real proletarians, with the help of the unorganised and downtrodden poor, should scatter and distribute leaflets, canvass workers' houses and the cottage of the rural proletarians and peasants in the remote villages ... they should go into casual meetings where the common people gather, and talk to the people, not in scientific (and not in very parliamentary) language, they should not at all strive to 'get seats' in parliament, but should everywhere strive to rouse the minds of the masses and to draw them into the struggle, to catch the bourgeois on their own statements, to utilise the apparatus they have set up, the elections they have appointed, the appeals to the country they have made, and to tell the people what Bolshevism is in a way that has never been possible (under bourgeois rule) outside of election times ..."

In *Lenin rediscovered*, I provided a check-list of eight identifying features of the Erfurtian outlook.<sup>[6]</sup> Let us quickly run down the items of this list with '*Leftwing*' communism in hand.

The first item on this list is "Erfurt allegiance": that is, an explicit statement of loyalty to the SPD model, to the Erfurt programme and to Karl Kautsky as authoritative expounder of the Erfurtian outlook. We can hardly expect to find such explicit statements of allegiance in 1920, given the extreme hostility between Lenin and Kautsky at this point. But the amazing thing is that we actually *do* find very striking

affirmations of Erfurtian allegiance - in particular, to “Kautsky when he was a Marxist”. Lenin gives a *page-long quote* from Kautsky dating from 1902, and comments with enthusiasm: “How well Karl Kautsky wrote 18 years ago!” And this in a book aimed at readers for whom Kautsky was nothing but a dirty word!

In the Kautsky passage cited by Lenin, we find the following comment: “The Russian revolutionary movement that is now flaring up will perhaps prove to be a most potent means of exorcising that spirit of flabby philistinism and temperate politics which is beginning to spread in our midst and may cause the thirst for battle and the passionate devotion to our great ideals to flare up in bright flames again.” Do we need to change a word to make this a summary of ‘*Leftwing communism*’ as a whole? We see that Kautsky in 1902 is *already condemning* the parties of the Second International for degeneration from their own ideal.<sup>[7]</sup>

In this connection, let us take a look at the full title of Lenin’s pamphlet: ‘*Leftwing communism: an infantile disorder*’. The standard translation of the subtitle is most misleading in tone, since “infantile disorder” sounds like a dismissive sneer. The Russian original, *detskaia bolezni*, means “childhood disease” and refers to mumps, measles and the like. A translation that brings out Lenin’s point better than the standard one is: ‘*Leftwing communism: a symptom of growing pains*’. The anarchistic or syndicalist rejection of the party principle is treated as the passing mistake of a rapidly maturing, but genuinely revolutionary spirit.

I bring this point of translation up now because both the metaphor and the underlying argument were first used by Kautsky in *The Erfurt programme*. We can also find in Kautsky’s writings the argument that unless social democracy showed a proper revolutionary spirit, impatient workers would not only reject the parties, but the party principle as such. In other words, opportunist revisionism had long been seen as giving strength to anarchist illusions.

In another striking passage, Lenin brags about the “granite theoretical basis” enjoyed by Bolshevism since its inception, a basis achieved by “following each and every ‘last word’ in Europe and America in this sphere with astonishing diligence and thoroughness”. We often hear that after 1914 and his break with the Second International, Lenin came to realise that the entire theoretical basis of “Second International Marxism” was faulty and needed to be revamped from the ground up. Well, if Lenin thought this, he was being very remiss in letting slip this opportunity of exhorting the congress delegates to rethink basic precepts of European Marxism of the late 19th century. Instead, Lenin shows his pride in the fact that Bolsheviks had so thoroughly assimilated those precepts.

The next item on my Erfurtian check-list is the aphoristic definition of social democracy as “the merger of socialism and the worker movement”. The idea behind this formula is that socialism will only be achieved when the mass worker movement accepts the socialist programme, and social democracy is the vehicle for bringing about this acceptance. This theme can be seen reflected in Lenin’s insistence in this pamphlet of bringing the message to the workers wherever they are - even if they can only be reached via “reactionary” trade unions and parliaments. Not to undertake this task means neglecting “that function of the proletarian vanguard which consists in training, educating, enlightening and drawing into the new life the most backward strata and masses of the working class and the peasantry”.

This last comment brings us to the third item in the check-list: the project of spreading the socialist message by means of expanding circles of awareness. In *'Leftwing' communism*, Lenin sums up these expanding circles in the formula "leaders-party-class-mass". The insistence and confidence that the message will spread to the very wide circle of the non-proletarian "masses", especially the peasantry, is a core feature of what I have elsewhere called Lenin's lifelong "heroic scenario".<sup>[8]</sup>

Lenin's emphasis on leadership is often seen as a great innovation on his part, but in *'Leftwing' communism*, we find Lenin claiming that *his* point is the one that is "elementary, simple and clear". His opponents, the ones who challenge the need for leaders, are said to be "striving to *invent* something quite out of the ordinary, and in their effort to be clever make themselves ridiculous ... Why do we need all this rigmarole, this new Volapük [an invented language like Esperanto]?"

The next item on our list is the ideal of an independent, class-based political party - one that is centralised, disciplined and programmatically pure. We can certainly say that Lenin and the Bolsheviks put a new emphasis on centralisation and discipline because of the challenges of civil war and state-building - but in so doing they were building on long-accepted values in the socialist movement. Lenin's drive to kick out the "opportunists" should also be seen as based on the old model of a party with a programmatic commitment to a particular message. In the past, the Second International purged itself of anarchists - now it was the turn of the opportunists and the "spineless" centre.

The next three items relate to political goals: political freedom as a proximate goal, party leadership of the whole people, and the 'hegemony' strategy of proletarian leadership of the peasantry. These have a much more complicated relation to Lenin's message in 1920, and constitute a topic I cannot discuss in this essay. The final defining feature of Erfurtianism in my check-list is internationalism, and this, of course, remains as an ideal.

*What is to be done?* (1902) and *'Leftwing' communism* (1920) can almost be said to book-end Lenin's career. In 1902, Lenin was propagating the European SPD model, suitably modified, for Russia. In 1920, Lenin was propagating the Russian 'Bolshevik' model, suitably modified, for Europe. How far do these models differ?

We have to remember the special focus of *'Leftwing' communism*. Lenin and the other Bolshevik leaders wanted, first, to get across that there was no immediate revolutionary situation in Europe, so that *preparation* was the order of the day; and, second, to bring the more anarchist-minded delegates up to speed on "the party principle". These two goals made them stress those parts of the party ideal that were *in common* between pre-war "revolutionary social democracy" and the new Communist International. The picture would look different if the topic at hand was the role of the party in a revolutionary situation or the role of the party after a soviet-style revolution.

Nevertheless, Lenin's pamphlet helps us understand a basic, if overlooked, historical role of the Communist International: it *preserved the old party ideal* in the new, post-war era. Both the spirit and the techniques of the party-organised permanent campaign became basic to the new communist parties. Of course, the new parties tried to be more militant, less 'careerist', than the old parties. They nevertheless had to confront the same essential challenge and dilemma: being a revolutionary party in a non-revolutionary situation.

Continuity is perhaps even more striking when we look at the techniques of the permanent campaign. In the generation or so after Lassalle, the socialist parties came up with a whole array of innovative techniques: the party-controlled press, the petition campaign, the rally, the political strike, the mass street demonstration with slogans and banners. Even the English word 'demonstration' and the French word *manifestation* acquired their current political meaning around the turn of the century and were explicitly tied to the socialist parties.<sup>[9]</sup> The far left has kept these techniques alive and they are still around today, remarkably unchanged. (Will perhaps the social media bring about a real evolution in the techniques of the permanent campaign?)

Thus concludes my three-part series about Lenin's use of the word 'Bolshevism'.<sup>[10]</sup> Obviously, 'Bolshevism' is a word that could and still can refer to a wide variety of things. Lenin's use of the word depended on the rhetorical context. In 1912, in a debate that was restricted to the world of revolutionary social democracy, 'Bolshevism' meant a faction that (Lenin insisted) should not be confused with the whole. In 1917, Lenin was forced rather grudgingly to accept the fact that 'Bolshevism' was used by the wide public as a label for the party in general. In 1920, we see Lenin himself using 'Bolshevism' in order to stress not what was distinctive about Russian Bolshevism, but rather the party as an exemplary incarnation of what used to be called 'revolutionary social democracy'.

Despite the changing rhetorical use of the term 'Bolshevism', Lenin's basic outlook did not change in its fundamentals over this turbulent period.

## Notes

1 . Cited by J Riddell (ed) *Workers of the world and oppressed peoples, unite! Proceedings and documents of the 2nd Congress, 1920* Atlanta 1991, p27 (translation modified).

2 . Sometimes the 2nd Congress is described as "optimistic" because of enthusiasm about the possibility about a soviet regime in Poland. But actual statements about Poland during the congress are more sober and defensive than this description suggests.

3 . J Riddell (ed) *Workers of the world and oppressed peoples, unite! Proceedings and documents of the 2nd Congress, 1920* Atlanta 1991, p147.

4 . See '**Both Pham Binh and Paul Le Blanc are wrong**' *Weekly Worker* April 6.

5 . As cited in LT Lih *Lenin rediscovered* Leiden 2006, p59.

6 . The list can be found in LT Lih *Lenin rediscovered* Leiden 2006, pp113-14.

7 . Another theme of Lenin's pamphlet is the need for flexible tactics, and "Kautsky when he was a Marxist" is cited as an authority on this topic as well.

8 . As described in LT Lih *Lenin* London 2011.

9 . KJ Callahan *Demonstration culture: European socialism and the Second International, 1889-1914* (Leicester 2010) brings out this and other fascinating information about the campaign techniques of the Second International.

10. Part one: '**A faction is not a party**' *Weekly Worker* May 3; part



two: 'How Lenin's party became (Bolshevik)' *Weekly Worker* May 17.

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