

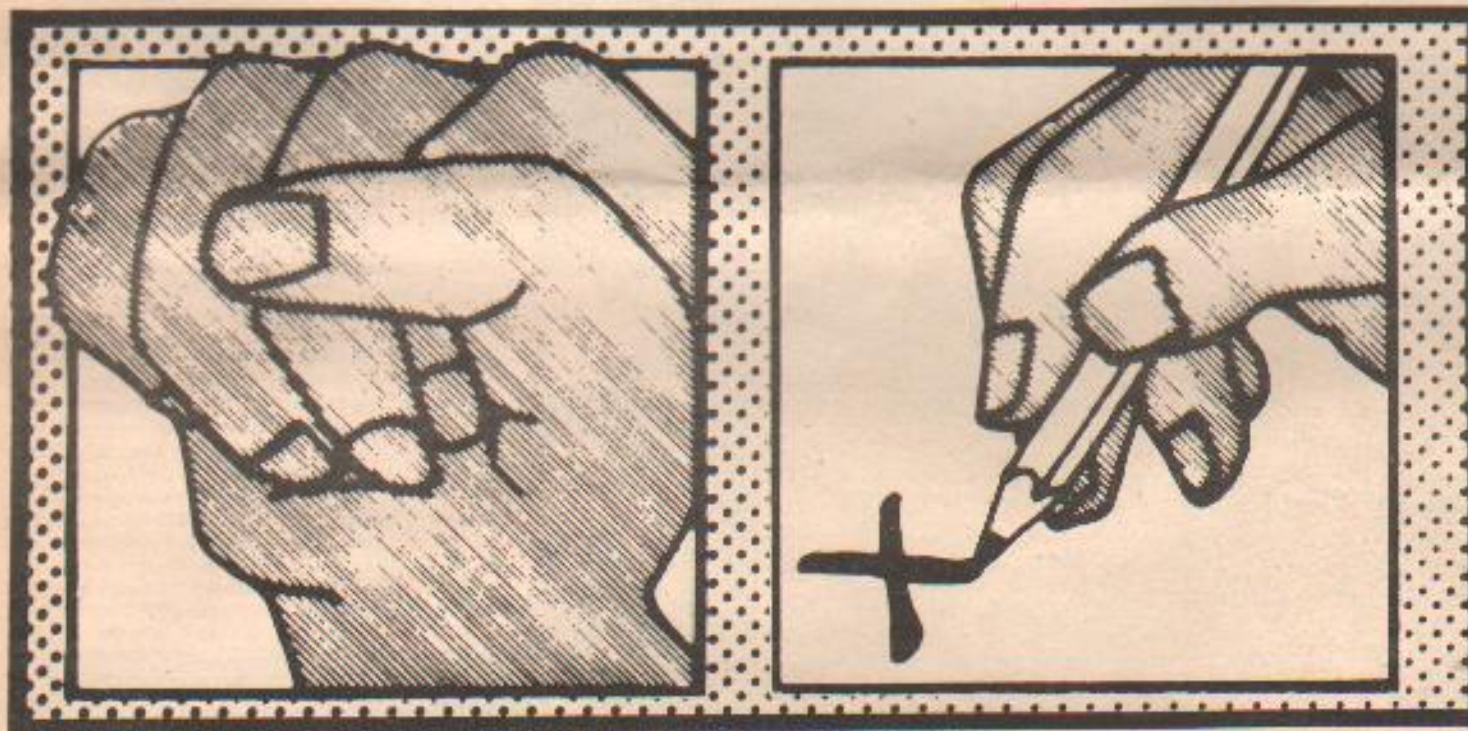
battle of ideas

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ELECTIONS & REVOLUTION



Only recently in the post-war period has the question of whether revolutionary socialists should stand candidates in elections ceased to be an academic one. With the vast majority of revolutionary organisations only numbering dozens of members and perhaps a few hundred supporters, the most useful tactic was to work alongside members of the reformist parties, to elect the candidates of those parties while simultaneously making revolutionary propaganda.

Since 1968 that situation has changed. In most European countries the membership of far left organisations now runs into thousands. In at least two of these countries — Italy and Spain — these organisations have tens of thousands of members.

Furthermore, the number of those who are prepared to vote for organisations to the left of the Communist and Socialist Parties is no longer tiny.

The 500,000 people who voted for the far left 'Proletarian Democracy' slate in Italy, the 200,000 who voted for the extreme left in Portugal and the 600,000 who voted for Trotskyist candidates in the last presidential elections in France are still in a tiny minority compared to the multi-millioned vote of the reformists. However such numbers of voters are significant in comparison with the number of active members of the reformist parties and indicate the potential growth and development of the organisations of the far left.

In Britain, the Labour Party is much stronger in its domination over the working class than its counterparts in the rest of Europe, and the far left much weaker. Nevertheless, the combined membership of the far left organisations still number thousands and a combined and concerted electoral intervention would result in tens of thousands of votes.

Thus all the theoretical and practical problems of standing in elections are being posed again for the revolutionary socialists.

In some countries this has meant the revival of traditional anarchist arguments against running in elections on principle — the policy of the PRP in Portugal is one example of this.

However, even when revolutionary participation in elections has been recognised as correct and important in principle, there still remain very important questions of tactics to be decided: whether to run in certain elections, where to run and whether independently or in alliance with other organisations.

This issue of *Battle of Ideas* is devoted to the historical experience of the revolutionary movement and elections. DOUG JENNESS, an American Trotskyist, considers the electoral tactics pursued by Lenin and the Bolsheviks in the first article. In the second ALAN JONES looks at the experience of electoral tactics developed by Lenin and Trotsky after the Russian Revolution.

Lenin as Campaign Manager

THE FIRST EXPERIENCE of the Bolshevik Party with elections was in 1905 when the Czarist regime attempted to call elections for the Duma — the Russian name for parliament.

It wasn't a parliament like those of Western Europe because Russia was not a bourgeois republic. Russia was ruled by a Czarist monarchy which was making a concession to the revolutionary upsurge by having a form of parliament, with the aim, however, of maintaining the monarchy.

The Bolsheviks utilised the tactic of boycotting the elections to the Duma, and the Duma was swept away by a general strike in October 1905. The tactic was obviously successful, and Lenin later so analysed it. The boycott was consistent with the objective conditions and the revolutionary possibilities in the country at the time, which made it wrong to rely on the parliamentary tactics of a more stable period.

In 1906, when elections were called again, the Bolsheviks again boycotted the election. Later, Lenin admitted that this boycott had been an error. The Bolsheviks had failed to recognise the ebbing of the revolutionary upsurge as soon as they should have, and to make the necessary tactical adjustments. It was a minor tactical error, Lenin wrote, but an error nonetheless.

The Bolshevik boycott did not succeed in sweeping aside these elections and the Duma was established. In a few months the Czarist government felt it was necessary to disband this Duma and set up a new one that would be more loyal. The government called for new elections in early 1907. This time the Bolsheviks

Bolsheviks were elected to office as deputies in the second Duma.

In June 1907 the second Duma was dissolved, smashed by a coup d'état and the Social Democratic deputies were arrested and imprisoned. New elections were called for November 1907. At this time a strong ultra-left faction within the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (to which both the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks belonged), embracing the majority of the leadership of the Bolshevik organisation, took the position that these elections should be boycotted. On the basis of the experience of the second Duma, which had been smashed, and the successful boycott in 1905, they said that the party should not participate in these elections.

Lenin was the only central leader of the Bolsheviks who favoured participation in these elections. The ultra-left Bolsheviks were defeated, and the party ran candidates, with the Bolsheviks having a few deputies elected to the third Duma.

The third Duma lasted until 1912, when elections were called again, for a fourth Duma — the last Duma before the February 1917 revolution.

Because there is more written about the 1912 elections than the previous ones, an examination of these will demonstrate Lenin's approach to election campaigns and to participation of the Bolsheviks in capitalist parliaments. Unlike the elections in 1906 and 1907, the 1912 elections were held during a rapidly growing upsurge of the working-class movement. Consequently, the opportunities existed for a larger propaganda offensive than in the previous elections. A

wrote an article entitled 'The Election Campaign and the Election Platform' which says in its opening paragraph: 'The elections to the Fourth Duma are due to be held next year. The Social Democratic Party must launch its election campaign *at once*.... Intensified propaganda, agitation, and organisation are on the order of the day, and the forthcoming elections provide a natural, inevitable, topical "pretext" for such work' (Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 17, page 278). In other words, the election campaign was to be the centre of the party's propaganda offensive.

Lenin then goes on to explain the importance of the election platform. It is not created especially for election times, but flows from the general programme of the party and the positions that the party has established through the experience of previous years. Then he states:

'Very often it may be useful, and sometimes even essential, to give the election platform of social democracy a finishing touch by adding a brief general slogan, a watchword for the elections, stating the most cardinal issues of current political practice, and providing a most convenient and most immediate pretext, as well as subject matter, for comprehensive socialist propaganda. In our epoch only the following three points can make up this watchword, this general slogan: (1) a republic, (2) confiscation of all landed estates, and (3) the eight-hour day' (*ibid.*, page 281).

In January 1912 (the elections were to be held in November), the Bolsheviks adopted an election platform along the lines proposed by Lenin. The initiation of the election campaign coincided with the

The launching of *Pravda* was a major victory for the Bolshevik Party. It became the principal instrument for publicising the election campaign and popularising its programme. Reading the articles Lenin wrote at that time, one can see that he viewed the promotion of *Pravda* and the building of the election campaign as an interlinked process. He wrote comprehensive articles about the paper, discussing how many new subscribers there were, how many were from the working-class districts, etc. Then he analysed what parts of the country the subscriptions came from, what proportion of subscribers were workers, and so on. He followed the development of the paper very closely along with the development of the election campaign.

At that time the election laws in Russia were extremely restrictive and discriminatory, denying the majority of peasants and workers the vote. In addition, the laws were very complicated and hard to understand. In the section of his biography of Stalin covering this period, Trotsky points out that 'combining painstaking attention to details with audacious sweep of thought, Lenin was practically the only Marxist who had thoroughly studied all the possibilities and pitfalls of Stolypin's election laws.' Not only was Lenin the party's expert on the election laws, but he was in essence the campaign director. Trotsky writes, 'Having politically inspired the election campaign, he guided it technically day by day. To help Petersburg, he sent in from abroad articles and instructions and thoroughly prepared emissaries' (Trotsky, *Stalin*, page 213). That Lenin functioned as

Lenin followed the development of the elections just as he did the growth of the newspaper and the growth of the membership of the party. When the elections were over, he wrote detailed statistical analyses of the meaning of the elections including the votes that each party received.

In the working-class districts, only Social Democrats were elected, including six Bolsheviks. All six Bolsheviks elected to the fourth Duma were workers, some of whom had been very active in the trade union movement and had played leading roles in it. That was not true of the Mensheviks. Only one or two of their seven deputies were workers.

In the first round of elections, the government used one or another pretext to disqualify workers at a number of factories in St Petersburg. This triggered huge demonstrations by the workers in support of the right to vote, their right to have an election, and their right to have their own deputies. The Bolsheviks were in the leadership of those demonstrations. As a result, some of the elections in these districts were invalidated and new elections were held. In such a situation, one can safely say, advocates of boycotting the elections would not have been too popular among these workers.

The thirteen Social Democratic deputies operated, at least in the beginning stages of participation in the Duma, as a common caucus. On the opening day of the first session of the fourth Duma, the joint caucus refused to participate in the selection of a presiding committee and a presiding chairman. This action was indicative of the policy that the Bolshevik deputies were to take for the next two-and-a-half years. They spoke on the floor, introduced exposés about the conditions of the working class, demanded answers from various government ministers about why things weren't being done better or differently, and participated in committees. But they did not help work on legislation or pass laws. On almost all the bills that came before the Duma, they abstained from the vote. When occasionally a law was introduced that would have a certain benefit for the working class, they would vote for it. But that occurred very, very seldom in the reactionary Duma.

Although the Bolshevik deputies were continually harassed, sometimes suspended from sessions, occasionally arrested, usually interrupted and heckled when speaking on the Duma floor, and continually tailed by the Czarist police, they were still able to function. All the Duma deputies of all parties were supposed to have immunity from arrest; they could only be convicted by a trial of their peers, that is, by the Duma itself. But the government continuously tested to see if it could violate the immunity of the Bolshevik deputies. When the government tried this, however, the masses would intervene with demonstrations and limit the power of the government.

Any infringement of the rights of the Bolshevik deputies had a profound radicalizing effect on workers who sincerely believed that their deputies should not suffer such indignities. The Bolshevik deputies had continuous contact with the workers in the factories. They visited the factories, and workers sent delegations to the deputies' headquarters. Badayev, one of the Bolshevik deputies, wrote many years later: "There was not a single factory or workshop, down to the smallest, with which I was not connected in some way or other" (*The Bolsheviks in the Tsarist Duma*, International Publishers, New York, 1929, page 86).

Between sessions of the Duma, the Bolshevik deputies extensively toured all the working-class areas — talking to workers, gathering information and, above all, doing internal party work. It is important to remember that at this time the Bolshevik Party was underground. Even a small liberal bourgeois party, the Cadets, was officially illegal, although it didn't operate underground. The Bolshevik Party could not operate as a legal political party. But its deputies in the Duma, whose members had a certain measure of legal standing, immunity from arrest and a certain respect — not only respect, but real authority among masses of workers — were in a strategic position to do party work.

They could do certain kinds of work much more easily than members who were underground. They helped arrange false passports, set up conferences, raised funds and worked on the newspaper. Badayev describes how Lenin urged him to work on the newspaper and do internal party work. He describes a myriad of such assignments that these Bolshevik deputies carried out. Their main responsibility was not passing legislation, but carrying out a large number of other activities that would be the normal function of any revolutionary party.

Lenin not only played the principal role in inspiring and organizing the election campaign, but he also played a key role in the activity of the Bolshevik fraction in the Duma. There were several meetings in Cracow between the Central Committee members of the party and the Duma deputies to discuss what should be done. Badayev recounts the results of one of these meetings:

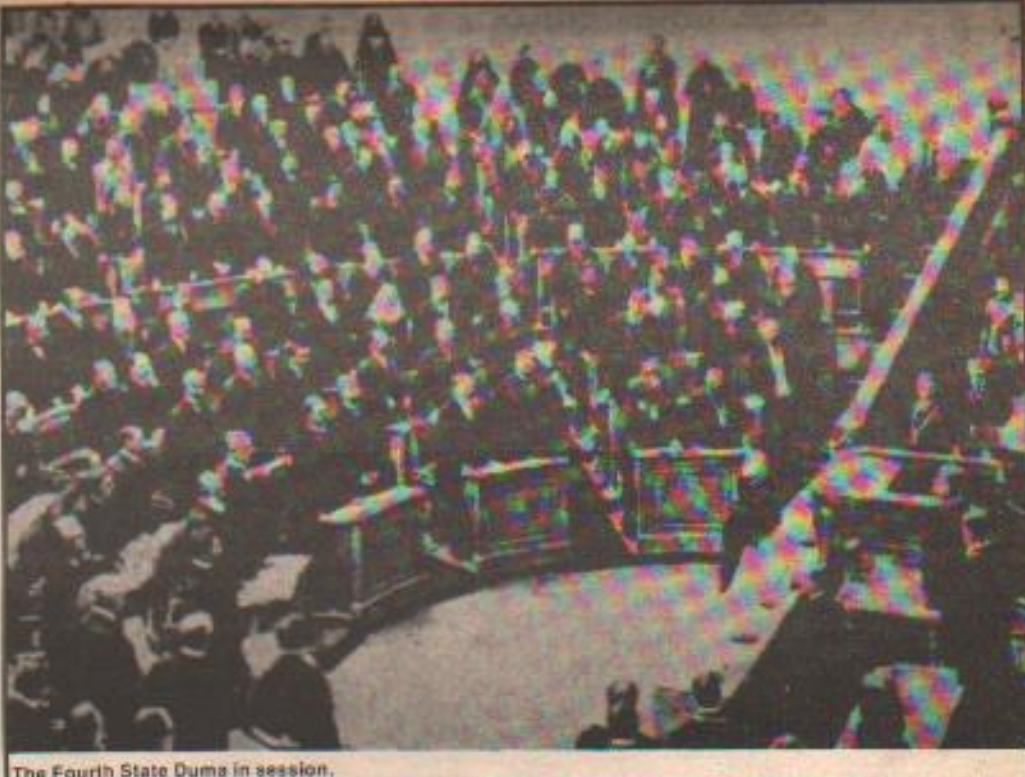
"We returned from Cracow, armed with concrete practical instructions. The general policy to be followed by the 'six' was clearly outlined and also

the details as to who was to speak on various questions, the material that should be prepared, the immediate work to be done outside the Duma, etc. Coming, as we did, from an entirely complicated and hostile environment, this direct exchange of ideas with the leading members of the party and above all with Lenin was of the utmost importance for us" (*Ibid.*, page 64).

When the Bolshevik deputies were first elected to the Duma, Lenin sent each of them a long questionnaire, with questions probing nearly every aspect of the election campaign: how much support had they received from this faction or that faction; how many intellectuals supported them; how many workers supported them; what issues were raised besides those that were in the election platform; how were the various parts of the party platform accepted; what were the arguments that were raised by the workers; what were the questions that were raised? He said, in effect, "I want each of you to fill out a questionnaire so that we can decide what we should do next and how to improve our work in the Duma".

Krupskaya, a leading Bolshevik who was also Lenin's wife, writes in her memoirs that Lenin sometimes drafted the speeches that the deputies gave in the Duma (Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, page 222). She recounts some of the speeches, particularly those on education and on the situation in the schools in Russia. It's interesting to look over these speeches because the speeches Lenin wrote for deputies in the Duma were quite different from most of the articles he wrote for *Pravda* or the letters that he sent to party members. He wrote each in a way that could be understood by the people he was trying to reach.

Very little coverage was granted in the bourgeois press to the Bolshevik deputies and of course there was no television or radio then. The only way that a speech in the Duma could be widely circulated to the workers was by publishing it as a pamphlet, printing excerpts of it as a leaflet, or printing it in *Pravda*. Since forty thousand copies of *Pravda* were sold every day in the working-class districts of St Petersburg, that was the principal way the speeches got out. To hear what their deputies were saying in the Duma was a good reason for the workers to buy the paper. In the eyes of the workers, they weren't just Bolshevik deputies, but were looked on as the workers' deputies. That was the common phrase in all the propaganda language of the time, the workers' deputies. That's how the Bolsheviks referred to their deputies, and that's how the workers referred to them.



The Fourth State Duma in session.

Another problem was that a Bolshevik deputy, Roman Malinovsky — the head of the fraction in fact — was a police agent; he was a Czarist cop. In his position, he was of course responsible for the persecution and imprisonment of many Bolsheviks, including the execution of many. But because of the disciplined manner in which the fraction functioned, he was forced to speak for the line of the Bolshevik Party. When, at first, he tried to deviate a little from the line, to soften his position on this or that question a little, Lenin would quickly note it, and he'd be brought to order quickly by the fraction. Malinovsky became one of the best speakers — if not the best speaker — for the Bolsheviks. He was one of the best, most aggressive and outgoing speakers for the Bolsheviks in the Duma and he did a lot of good

the country and the tightening hold of the governmental reaction, the arrest and trial stimulated worker and student demonstrations and protests. There were protests in the factories against the sentencing of the worker deputies. News of the trial swept throughout the country, leaflets were distributed by the thousands, and the Bolshevik opposition to and explanation of the war were widely communicated.

We should note the kind of defence campaign the Bolsheviks waged. They launched a massive defence campaign to get the issues out to the country. The fact that the elected mass leaders of the working class were being sent to Siberia had a profound impact on the consciousness of those who still had parliamentary illusions. (Lenin wrote an article after the trials criticising most of the deputies for not more clearly stating their position on the war, but praising the good tactics that were used in the defence.)

What are the lessons of these two-and-a-half years of experience? The campaign and election of Duma deputies provided legitimacy and important legal opportunities for the underground, illegal Bolshevik Party. It served as a means of reaching and cementing ties with the mass of workers. It served to expose the Czarist government and political parties as well as the liberals and Mensheviks. In particular, it helped to draw a sharp line of distinction between the Bolshevik Party and the reformist Mensheviks. It showed that revolutionaries can use the parliamentary tribune without becoming corrupted, or manoeuvred into taking responsibility for the reactionary government and its policies. Parliamentary work can be merged with, and play a central role in the entire scope of party activities. Lenin did not view electoral work in a period of ascending radicalisation as a peripheral or sideline activity. It was not a task to be carried on in routine fashion; rather, it was the central task of the party, requiring a tremendous mobilisation of forces, political inspiration, and great care for detail.

The parliamentary caucus, in order to maintain its principled line and to be effective, must be subordinate to the party as a whole. This was crucial. The Mensheviks and the Western European Social Democratic parliamentary representatives at that time had begun to decide for themselves what their line in parliament was going to be. But the Bolsheviks proved that the only way to maintain a revolutionary perspective in this kind of activity was to keep the Duma caucus, with all the pressures on it, subordinate to the party as a whole.

One of the key lessons was the relationship of this work to the February and October 1917 revolutions. Trotsky writes in his *History of the Russian Revolution* that had a revolutionary situation developed in 1914 — and it was possible then — the Bolsheviks might have come directly to power without the country having to go through a provisional government and a Menshevik-Social Revolutionary coalition government with the capitalist parties, as occurred in 1917.

He points out that because of the First World War, national chauvinism and the victimisation of their party, the Bolsheviks were not in a position to seize power during the February 1917 revolution. He then explains that it was those class-conscious workers who had assimilated the lessons and the teachings of the Bolshevik Party two or three years before the outbreak of the war who played a key role in making the February revolution. In 1912-14 the Bolshevik Party was the mass party in the working-class districts. The lessons absorbed in that pre-war period — the election campaigns, the participation of the Bolsheviks in the Duma, the things they said in their speeches, the publication of *Pravda* — were crucial in February 1917.

After the February revolution, when the Bolshevik leaders returned from exile, many of the roots they had in the masses before the war still existed, and this facilitated the process of rebuilding the party for the October revolution. There was a direct link between the activity that the Bolshevik Party carried out in the 1912-14 period and the making of the October revolution.

There is another chapter in the history of the Bolshevik approach to electoral activity: their attitude toward the election of the Constituent Assembly in 1917. The Provisional Government that was thrown up after the Czarist regime was ousted in the February revolution continually promised to call a Constituent Assembly, but in practice kept delaying it. The Bolsheviks supported a Constituent Assembly because there were still widespread illusions, particularly among the peasants, about the necessity for an assembly, i.e. a bourgeois republican form of government; and these illusions had to be dispelled.

The Bolsheviks' vigorous support for a Constituent Assembly helped expose the reluctance of the bourgeois parties and the reformists to call elections for the Constituent Assembly. Although the Bolsheviks supported a Constituent Assembly against the restoration of the monarchy or a military coup d'état they left no doubt that between a workers' republic and a bourgeois republic, and a bourgeois parliamentar-

As in any parliamentary fraction, the Bolshevik deputies were strongly susceptible to the pressures of adapting to the parliamentary environment. There were more than a few instances when Lenin wrote to them, urging them to take a sharper position on major questions. This was particularly true when the First World War broke out in 1914.

This wasn't the only problem the Bolshevik deputies faced. At the time they were elected, they had been working together in a joint Duma caucus with the Mensheviks. But political differences between the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks, not only in the Duma caucus, but in the party as a whole, had become so sharp that within a year after the elections the Bolshevik deputies formed their own caucus. In the joint Duma caucus the Menshevik deputies attempted to muzzle the six Bolshevik deputies by placing them under 'majority' discipline. A definitive split occurred between the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks that was never healed.

This split had to be explained to the class-conscious workers, and a massive campaign was launched to solicit the support of the workers: collection of petitions; debates at factories between Bolshevik and Menshevik deputies; articles in *Pravda*, and so on. In other words, the position of the Bolshevik deputies was used to expose the Mensheviks before the masses, to drive a wedge between the masses and the Mensheviks, and thus they did very successfully. They pointed out that the Mensheviks more and more wanted to adapt to the liberals on this or that question. They wrote about it in their paper and they talked to the workers about it, and within a few weeks it became crystal clear that the Bolsheviks enjoyed far more support among the workers than the Mensheviks.

Badayev estimates that among the class-conscious workers, the Bolsheviks had between 75 and 90 per cent of the support; the Mensheviks, the rest. For example, the Bolsheviks held a majority of seats on

propaganda work. He was forced to because of the way the fraction operated and the way the party operated. This shows that a disciplined party can't easily be destroyed by police agents.

While Malinovsky was still a deputy, there was a shift in the hierarchy of the police department and his superiors decided to pull him out. Suddenly one day, he left. The Bolsheviks had no warning whatsoever. There had been a few suspicions that he might be a cop, but basically there was no warning. He just took off to some other country. Of course, the fact that he just left like that created a big scandal and the Bolsheviks had to be able to answer it. They denounced him and kicked him out of the party. But there was still no proof that Malinovsky was an agent. It was never proved until after the revolution when the Bolsheviks obtained the Czarist police files. When he returned to Russia after the revolution, he was executed for his role as a police agent.

So we see that one of the best examples of a parliamentary fraction of a socialist party was worked out by the Bolsheviks. They did it in spite of tremendous obstacles, despite a poor objective situation, and despite the fact that the head of the fraction was a police agent. That's a lot better than what the German socialist movement was able to do at that time under much more auspicious conditions.

With the outbreak of the First World War and the entry of Russia into the war, the Bolshevik deputies held firm in refusing to vote for war credits in the Duma. They voted against the war credits and walked out of the session. First they acted jointly with the Mensheviks; later they held fast by themselves as the Mensheviks capitulated to the pressures. They denounced the imperialist war of their own imperialist ruling class on the floor of the Czarist Duma. Of course, with this position, it was only a matter of a few months before all five of the Bolshevik deputies (not the agent) and six other Bolshevik leaders in the country were arrested, tried and sentenced to hard



A. E. Badayev

Finally called, the Bolsheviks participated in the elections. Lists of candidates had to be drawn up and submitted to the electoral commission by 17 October. Elections were scheduled for 12 November. Between these dates, the Soviets, under the leadership of the Bolshevik Party, took political power. There was a social revolution, the most momentous in the history of the world. This posed the question: should the Bolsheviks cancel the elections for the Constituent Assembly scheduled for 12 November? The Bolsheviks decided to permit the elections and keep their own candidates in the race.

When the Constituent Assembly met the first week in January 1918, two months after the new Soviet government came to power, the Bolsheviks introduced a resolution in the Assembly calling on the body to support the Soviet government. The Bolsheviks did not have a majority, and when the delegates voted this motion down, exposing where they really stood as opponents of the workers' government, the Bolsheviks dissolved the Constituent Assembly in the name of the Soviet government. By this time, after two months of revolution and experience, and because of the stand of the other reformist parties on the question of the Soviet government, most of the illusions of the masses about parliamentarism had been dispelled.

Reviewing this experience later in *'Left-Wing' Communism, an Infantile Disorder*, Lenin wrote:

"The conclusion which follows from this is absolutely incontrovertible: it has been proved that participation in a bourgeois-democratic parliament even a few weeks before the victory of a Soviet republic, and even after such a victory, not only does not harm the revolutionary proletariat, but actually helps it to prove to the backward masses why such parliaments deserve to be dispersed; it helps their successful dispersal, and helps bourgeois parliamentarism to become 'politically obsolete'" (Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 31, page 60).

The positive lessons of the Bolshevik experience in parliamentarism, along with the negative example of the Western European parties, was discussed thoroughly and codified in a set of theses adopted at the Second Congress of the Communist International in 1920. In summary some of the key points included in these theses are:



* Bourgeois parliaments or congresses cannot in any way serve as the arena of struggle for reform, or for improving the lot of the working people.

* Revolutionary socialists repudiate parliamentarism, as a state form, for the class dictatorship of the working class. They repudiate the possibility of winning over parliament to their side. It is only possible to speak of utilising the capitalist state organisation with the object of destroying it.

* The fundamental method of struggle of the working class against capitalist rule is the method of mass action; parliamentary tactics, although important, are supplementary and subordinate.

* The objective of work within elections or capitalist congresses is propaganda to reach workers and other sectors of the population who have not yet been reached.

* Election campaigns should not be geared primarily toward getting votes, but should be revolutionary mobilisations involving not only the party leaders and candidates but the entire party membership.

* Refusal to participate in elections in principle is a naive, childish doctrine.

* The question of the form of intervention in elections, including boycotts, is a tactical question, to be worked out according to the concrete circum-

stances.

These theses were discussed and passed because of the strong tendency in many of the new, militant but inexperienced Communist parties adhering to the Third International to reject all forms of parliamentarism and all participation in any type of legal organisation such as trade unions.

I would like to conclude by referring to Lenin's attitude toward election campaigns in Western Europe and the United States. He stated that he knew people said that this form of parliamentarism was fine in Russia, but that in other countries things were different. That was the wrong conclusion, Lenin said. Communists in all countries should:

"change, all along the line, in all spheres of life, the old socialist, craft-unionist, syndicalist, parliamentary work into new work, Communist work. In Russia, too, we had a great deal of opportunist and purely bourgeois commercialism and capitalist swindling during election times. The Communists in Western Europe and America must learn to create a new, unusual, non-opportunist, non-careerist parliamentarism; 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 cottages of the rural proletariat and peasants in the remote villages ...; they should go into the most common taverns, penetrate into the unions, societies and 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 (not counting, of course, times of big strikes, when, in Russia, a similar apparatus for widespread popular agitation worked even more intensively).

"It is very difficult ...; but it can and must be done, because the tasks of Communism cannot be fulfilled without effort; and every effort must be made to fulfil practical tasks, ever more varied, ever more closely connected with all branches of social life, winning branch after branch and sphere after sphere from the bourgeoisie" (*ibid.*, page 98).

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Election Tactics in the West

THE MOST BASIC guidelines of revolutionary tactics in elections came out of the experience of the Bolshevik Party in Russia. The most general of these tactical conclusions was stated in the resolution of the Second Congress of the Communist International entitled *Theses on Communist Parties and Parliament*:

"18) ... the boycotting of elections or of parliament, as well as walking out of Parliament, are permissible primarily when the conditions for the immediate transition to armed struggle for power are at hand." [1]

Simply outlining this proposition however, while important in the struggle against the powerful ultra-left current in the early period of the Communist International, was not at all sufficient to solve all the problems which confronted the early Communist Parties in their electoral tactics.

Lenin could already write in *Left Wing Communism - An Infantile Disorder* that it was necessary to create: "a new, uncanny, non-opportunist, and non-careerist parliamentarism." [2] But in a number of Communist Parties in Western Europe the massive pressure of bourgeois parliamentarism, and the previous reformist electoral training many of the Communist Party leaders had received in the social democratic parties, led to parliamentarist methods dominating election tactics. [3] The developing of really revolutionary tactics for elections in imperialist countries was to be a slow and painful process for revolutionary socialists.



John MacLean

Ironically enough one of the most outstanding first examples of revolutionary intervention in elections came not from the Communist Parties but from a Marxist, John MacLean, who had broken with the Communist International on an ultra-left political line.

MacLean was able to successfully combine work in organising the unemployed, protests against the undemocratic denial of premises for revolutionary meetings, participation in the May Day demonstrations, and work in defence of political prisoners with a strong intervention into Parliamentary local elections.

In the General Election of 1922 MacLean was able to get 4000 votes standing in the Gorbals against Labour. In the spring of 1923 he personally ran in two by-elections and, through his Scottish Workers Republican Party, was preparing to run candidates in 12 seats in the local elections of the autumn of that year. [4]



Delegates to the Second Congress of the Communist International.

now tactically to utilise elections, despite their eventual fruitlessness due to MacLean's wrong positions on a whole range of basic programmatic questions. But the British Communist Party rapidly came to provide some of the clearest examples of how not to combine electoral work with other tactics.

In the early period of its formation the British Communist Party, following the advice of Lenin, had developed relatively coherent and clear tactics for work in relation to the Labour Party, the trade unions and elections. It combined systematic work to build a left wing in the unions (which was to culminate in 1924 in the formation of the Minority Movement) with work to build the left inside the Labour Party (leading to the formation of the National Left Wing Movement).

However in combination with these tactics, all of which were essentially an application of the line of the united front, the Communist Party clearly intervened to counterpose itself politically to the Labour Party.

It did this through the combination of applications to affiliate to the Labour Party, when this was rejected proposing separate workers' elections to decide whether Labour or Communist should stand in each area against the Tories and Liberals, and finally standing its own candidates in safe Labour seats where there was no chance of letting the Tories in. [5]

Such electoral work did not bring dramatic results. In 1923 the Communist Party received 77,000 votes (average 9600 votes per candidate) and in 1924 55,000 votes (average 6900 votes per candidate), but it was a way to slowly build up their support and membership. [6]

From 1924-25 on, however, a new influence dominated the Communist Party of Great Britain. Under the influence of the Stalinist degeneration of the Soviet Union and the Communist International, the CPGB began to move from a united front with the Labour left to a political accommodation to them — a policy embodied in the shape of the Anglo-Russian Trade Union Committee. This accommodation took the form of the dissolution of the political struggle of the CPGB into the trade unionism of the Minority Movement. As Trotsky put it:

"The disastrous experience with the Anglo-Russian Committee was based entirely upon effacing the independence of the British Communist Party ... This was obtained by the actual dissolution of the party into the so-called 'Minority Movement', that is, a 'left' opposition inside the trade unions." [7]

Instead of the policy of mobilisation, Trotsky

and struggle of the CPGB — a policy which clearly involved an electoral component.

"The Labour Party and the trade unions — these are not two principles, they are only a technical division of labour. Together they are the fundamental support of the domination of the British bourgeoisie. The latter cannot be overthrown without overthrowing the Labourite bureaucracy. And that cannot be attained by opposing the trade union to the state as such, but by the active opposition of the Communist Party to the Labour bureaucracy in all fields of social life. In the trade unions, in strikes, in the electoral campaign, in parliament, and in power." [8]

Naturally a clear electoral policy was not by itself sufficient to establish the political independence of the

CPGB — this would have involved a whole series of steps including raising the demand for a Labour Government in the period prior to the 1926 General Strike — but it was one of the measures which were necessary to prevent a united front policy turning into political accommodation.

THE PERIOD from 1925-26 was, for the Communist Parties, one of accommodation to the reformists — the period of 'Right Centrist Downsliding', as Trotsky later described it. From 1928 onwards this was ousted by the ultra-leftism of the so-called 'Third Period' — the time during which the Stalinists declared the social democratic parties to be 'social fascist'. In this 'Third Period' the Communist Parties put big resources into elections — showing that electoral participation in itself is not in the slightest a safeguard against ultra-leftism.

Trotsky supported the policy of the Communist Parties of running in elections, against those in the Trotskyist movement who criticised the German Communist Party leader Thaelmann for running against the social democrats, but of course criticised the Communist Parties' suicidal ultra-left policies in these elections.

Following the disaster of the Third Period, the Comintern from 1934 onwards turned to the policy of the Popular Front collaboration with capitalist parties. In certain countries this meant big electoral gains for the Communist Parties — at the expense of giving up their revolutionary programme.

But in countries where there were social democratic or bourgeois liberal parties it led to the CPs virtually giving up standing candidates in elections in the name of 'unity'. In the 1935 elections in Britain, for example, the CPGB ran a grand total of two candidates.

In responding to this changing political situation Trotsky once again carefully adapted electoral tactics to the needs of the situation.

In the initial phase of the 'Third Period' the electoral tactics proposed by Trotsky were in line with the orientation of that period of reforming the



Members of the Birmingham Branch



Hitler's assumption of power marked the final degeneration of the Comintern under Stalin.

Communist International — a policy only abandoned after the tremendous test of Hitler's coming to power in Germany showed that the Communist International had definitely gone over to the side of counter-revolution.

In line with this policy Trotsky demanded that his supporters should not run in elections in their own right but should extend critical support to the candidates of the Communist Parties. [9]

From 1933 onwards, however, all general considerations against running independent candidates were removed. Orienting towards building independent parties, and in many cases aiming at fusing with centrist groups which appeared to be moving to the left, Trotsky saw the standing of independent revolutionary candidates in elections as important. A particularly good illustration of Trotsky's policy on elections at this time was the case of the Independent Labour Party in Britain. Trotsky attacked the CPGB in the 1935 election for not running candidates, supposedly in the interests of unity with Labour. He also criticised those in the Trotskyist movement who had opposed the ILP for running candidates. In an interview on the subject he was unequivocal.

Question: Was the ILP correct in running as many candidates as possible in the recent General Elections, even at the risk of splitting the vote?

Answer: Yes. It would have been foolish for the ILP to have sacrificed its political programme in the interests of so-called unity, to allow the Labour Party to monopolise the platform, as the Communist Party did. We do not know our strength unless we test it. There is always a risk of splitting and of losing deposits, but such risks must be taken. [10]

The ILP stood 17 candidates, had 4 MPs elected and received 140,000 votes [11]. With the movement of the Communist Parties and the social democrats towards the Popular Front however, Trotsky called for a sharp turn in tactics. Attracted by the prospect of united action between the workers' parties, and not yet having passed through the experience of the betrayal of the Popular Front, workers began to flood into the mass reformist parties.

Inside the social democratic parties important left wings began to form — for example in France a split in the Socialist Party occurred in November 1933, with the right wing (the so-called 'Neos') walking out. After this left wing groups previously expelled from the party were invited to return, factions were permitted to operate and had their own papers. [12]

The membership of the Socialist Party rapidly almost doubled — from 110,000 in 1934 to 202,000 in 1936. [13]

Similar developments followed in other countries — in Spain the majority of the youth organisation came out in favour of a Fourth International, in Britain centrist developments such as the Socialist League and Left Book Club emerged, and even in the United States, where of course the SP was much weaker than anything in Europe, a radicalisation of Socialist Party members began to take place with the proclamation of the 'all inclusive party'.

Faced with this development of left wings in the Socialist Parties, Trotsky advocated a change in tactics to entry into these parties. This involved a fight inside these parties against the Popular Front, and this entry tactic was carried out in France from August 1934 and in other countries from shortly thereafter. The results for Trotskyists were significant. In France the Trotskyists increased their forces and in the United States the Trotskyists were able to double their membership in a year. In Spain an important negative confirmation was given of the tactic when, following the criminal refusal of the centrist 'Trotskyist' Nin to enter the Socialist Party, the entire youth organisation of the SP went over to Stalinism — the central core of the present leadership of the Spanish CP essentially consists of forces won from the Socialist Party youth in that period.

This turn of the Trotskyists into the Socialist Parties evidently posed quite different tactics in elections to the preceding one. The whole point of entry had been that the forces to be won to revolutionary politics inside the SPs were greater than those forces which could, in that period, be won by building an independent organisation. In those circumstances it was not merely impossible, but not even sensible to run candidates against the Socialist Party.

In those circumstances even after the Trotskyists were expelled, which took place in France in September 1935, Trotsky still considered that the correct tactics were an orientation using such tactics as standing in constituencies where the SP or CP, following the Popular Front policy, withdrew their candidates in favour of the capitalist Radical Party.



French workers demonstrate in favour of the Popular Front in 1935.

THE FINAL development of tactics involving election which was developed by Trotsky came in the late 1930s with the breaking up of the workers' illusions in the Popular Fronts. In virtually all countries the rush of workers into the mass parties ceased as they began to gear up for war.

In France membership of the SFIO, having nearly tripled in 1934-37, fell back from 287,000 in 1937 to 275,000 in 1938. [14] Labour Party membership in Britain, having reached a peak of 447,000 in 1937 fell back to 409,000 by 1939. In a number of countries centrist splits from social democratic parties occurred — France being the most important case with the formation of the Workers and Peasants Socialist Party (PSOP).

The Trotskyist organisations in these circumstances gave up the entry tactic and in most cases oriented to the building of independent parties. This once again, where the Trotskyists were strong enough, posed the question of running candidates in elections.

The most important debate on Trotskyist electoral tactics in this period, and one of the most illustrative of any discussion on elections, was that concerning the electoral policy of the American Socialist Workers Party.

From the mid-1930s onwards the Socialist Workers Party in the United States had been involved in the building of the mass American industrial trade unions — the Congress of Industrial Organisations. In the course of this work the Trotskyists had, quite correctly, entered into united action and united fronts with a whole series of left reformists — the CIO had been launched by trade union leaders who in general did not even stand for an independent working class party. Trotsky emphatically supported this policy.

Under the pressure of this alliance in the trade unions however, and pressures of a real mass influence which they acquired in certain fields, Trotsky considered that the SWP had begun to bend towards a failure to politically differentiate itself adequately by every means possible from the union lefts. Trotsky for example stated of a trade union paper the SWP was involved in that: 'the Northwest Organiser remains unchanged. It is a photograph of our adaptation to the Rooseveltians'. [15]

One of the manifestations of this danger of adaptation was lack of electoral activity. In the early 1930s failure to intervene in this field was probably attributable to ultra-leftism by the SWP on the question of elections. Already in 1938 the National Committee Plenum of the SWP passed a motion published in the SWP's paper *Socialist Appeal* under the title 'Political Committee Rapped on Election'. The real situation in which the test came however was the 1940 Presidential Election.

The context of the 1940 election was clear. The American ruling class, under the leadership of Roosevelt, was preparing for war. Being dragged along in their tow were the left supporters of Roosevelt in the trade unions. For their own reasons however, most importantly the Nazi-Soviet pact of

1939, the US Communist Party was demagogically coming out against the war and therefore to some degree in a temporary clash with the Rooseveltians. At the same time on trade union questions the Rooseveltians in general had better positions than the Stalinists and the SWP was correctly in alliance with them against the Communist Party. A clear clash therefore developed between orientation on the trade union field and orientation in politics.

In these circumstances Trotsky came out with a clear proposal. He called for the SWP, after it had failed to put forward its own candidate in the 1940 Presidential election, to call for a vote for the CP's Presidential candidate Browder. The SWP rejected the proposal — Trotsky criticised this in the following terms: 'You propose a trade union policy, not a Bolshevik policy. Bolshevik policies begin outside the trade unions'. [16]

Looking back on this debate, and acknowledging Trotsky as right and the SWP leadership of the time as wrong, Farrell Dobbs, who was later the National Secretary of the SWP, outlined clearly the pressures which had been on the SWP and the source of its mistake. He states that Trotsky was wrong in his fear that the SWP was bending to the trade union milieu, but that: 'a tendency did exist ... to give "practical" considerations undue weight concerning our approach to political tasks in the mass movement'. Dobbs considers that:

'Our failure to take that step (to call for a vote for Browder) left us with serious problems in finding a way to differentiate ourselves from Roosevelt's supporters in the trade unions.' [17]

In the case of the alliance with the CIO lefts, as earlier with the trade union lefts in Britain, a clear electoral participation was one of the tactics necessary to combine a united front policy with the maintaining of the clear political independence of the revolutionary party.

ALAN JONES

[1] Degras: Documents of the Communist International, vol. 1, p.154.

[2] Lenin: Collected Works, vol.31, p.98.

[3] See for example Trotsky's criticisms of the French Communist Party in *The First Five Years of the Communist International*, vol.2, p.44-48.

[4] See Nan Milton: John MacLean, p.282 and p.284-291.

[5] For a detailed account of Lenin's tactical proposals for the British Communist Party, see Lenin: Collected Works, vol.31, p.86-88.

[6] Figures from Kendall: *The Labour Movement in Europe*, p.395 and Butler: *British Political Facts 1900-1960*, p.105.

[7] Trotsky: *The Mistakes of the Right Elements of the French Communist League on the Trade Union Question in Trotsky on Britain*, vol.2, p.253.

[8] Trotsky: *The Errors in Principle of Syndicalism in Trotsky on Britain*, vol.2, p.240, our emphasis.

[9] See for example Trotsky: *On the Politics of the Left Opposition in Germany in Writings of Leon Trotsky 1929*, p.337.

[10] Trotsky: *Once Again the ILP in Writings of Leon Trotsky 1935-36*, p.60.

[11] Butler: *British Political Facts 1900-1960*, p.124.

[12] Trotsky: *On Britain*, vol.3, p.227.

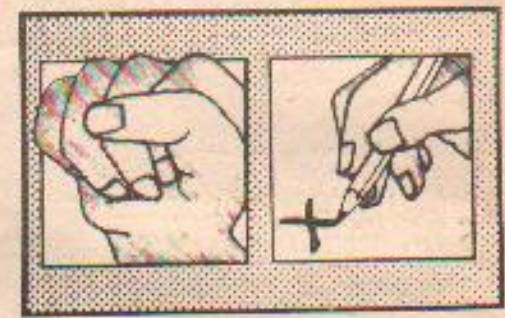
[13] Kendall: *The Labour Movement in Europe*, p.380.

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1939-40*, p.275.

[16] *Ibid.*, p.273.

[17] Dobbs: *A Disagreement with Trotsky Over Tactics in Intercontinental Press*, 1 March 1976, p.314.



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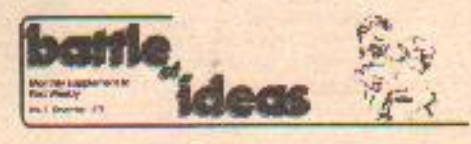
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