

Lenin on party building



What kind of organisation does the working class need if it wants to overthrow imperialism and build socialism?

In a [previous issue](#) of Proletarian, we dealt with the importance of revolutionary theory; stressing that without it no revolutionary movement can succeed in achieving its purpose. However, revolutionary theory alone will not overthrow capitalism; there needs to be unity, coordination and direction of the working class for it to succeed in taking power. *The proletariat needs to combine its revolutionary theory with a strong organisation; it needs a party.* Written in 1904 as a summary of the events of the second congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP, which later became the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolshevik)), [One Step Forward, Two Steps Back](#) is a cornerstone document of Marxism Leninism in relation to organisational matters. The congress it documents was held in 1903 with the aim of unifying into one democratically centralised party the disparate groups that had, until that point, been working semi-autonomously in Russia. It was at this congress that the RSDLP split decisively into two groups: the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks (meaning literally 'majority' and 'minority'). The group around Lenin constituted the majority at the congress. Lenin's analysis of the congress meticulously detailed each debate and vote, drawing out the development and divergence of the various trends at the congress. The three central themes of the book that emerge are: - What type of party does the working class need? - How should such a party be organised? - The importance of the fight against anarchism and amateurishness in matters of organisation. Lenin demonstrated that questions of organisation, which may at first appear to be petty and dogmatic, are of tremendous importance in the struggle against oppression and exploitation and for socialism – comparable in significance, in fact, with political questions. He showed how a sloppy, petty-bourgeois, anarchistic approach to organisational matters is dangerous and can only lead to failure, pointing out: "these fundamental characteristics of opportunism in matters of organisation ... are ... to be observed in all the social-democratic parties in the world, wherever there is a division into a revolutionary and an opportunist wing". (It must be noted that in 1904 the term 'social-democratic' still meant communist and had not yet become synonymous

with class collaborationism.)

What type of party do we need?

In answering this, we must first address the question: 'What is our goal; what is it that we are fighting for?' The goal of communists is to overthrow the capitalist system, which is sucking the life out of the majority of people on this planet, and to replace it with socialism. Undertaking this is no simple feat. The ruling imperialist elite are not simply going to give up their enormous wealth and control and hand it over to the working class, no matter how nicely they are asked or how reasonably it is explained to them that their time to rule is up! It is the role of the proletariat to take the lead in overthrowing the bourgeoisie; in the fight for control of the means of production, distribution and exchange (those things that are the backbone of society). Lenin demonstrated in 1903's [What is to be Done?](#) that the proletariat cannot rely on spontaneity to overthrow the bourgeoisie. There needs to be direction and unity of action, which can come only from a strong and consistent political understanding of the nature of capitalism. Without this, the working class will waste its energy resisting capitalism in a random ineffectual manner instead of directing its activity along the quickest path to socialism. The working class needs a spearhead, a vanguard, a consolidated and strong leadership: a leadership that is united by organisation and steered by revolutionary theory and experience. In *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*, Lenin persistently stressed that, although the party is the truest representation of the political aspirations of the working class, an equals sign cannot be placed between the working class and the party. The party is the *vanguard*, the *advanced detachment* of the working class, comprising the best elements of that class and fully armed with theoretical knowledge and practical skill, ready to lead the working class in its struggle for socialism. At the second congress of the RSDLP, the adoption of the party programme – the political direction of the party as drafted by Lenin and those close to him – was passed without a fierce battle. This was owing to the strong ideological campaign carried out over the preceding years by Iskra (the newspaper edited by Lenin) against the open

opportunism of the economists. On the question of organising the party, however, real differences emerged between Lenin and the solid Marxists on the one hand, and the wavering and opportunistic elements in the party on the other.

How should a proletarian party be organised?

"A party which has set out to lead the fighting proletariat must not be a chance conglomeration of individuals, but a united centralised organisation, so that its activities can be directed according to a single plan." ([The proletarian class and the proletarian party](#) by JV Stalin, 1 January 1905) Having stressed that the party must comprise the best elements of the working class, Lenin exposed the back-door methods that the opportunists of the day were using to try to turn the party into a loosely-organised club, open in membership to anyone who cared to sign themselves up. The argument of the opportunists was that party membership should be based solely on an acceptance of the party programme and on "rendering" the party "regular personal assistance". Martov went so far as to say that "Every striker should have the right to proclaim himself a party member." But this opportunist formulation opens the door for party membership that does not require submission to real party discipline. It is the ideal membership criterion for the individualist who wants to one day wear the party badge and the next do his own thing without fear of reprisal or without the need for justification to the party. In effect, it creates a *party of individuals*, committed on paper to fighting for socialism, but not required to implement and engage in the struggle in practice as a part of the whole party. Lenin, by contrast, insisted that every radical could not simply be allowed to sign him/herself up – the party must enrol those comrades who are willing not only to accept the party's programme but also to submit themselves to party discipline and *actively to work in a party organisation*. Lenin pointed out that "for that very reason it is wrong to want 'every striker' to have the right to call himself a party member, for if 'every strike' were not only a spontaneous expression of the powerful class instinct and of class struggle which is leading inevitably to the social revolution, but a conscious expression of the process ... then our party would forthwith and at once embrace the whole working class, and, consequently, would at once put an end to bourgeois society as a whole. If it is to be a conscious spokesman in fact, the party must be able to

work out organisational relations that will ensure a definite level of consciousness and systematically raise this level." If every strike is a *conscious* step towards socialism then there is no need for leadership or a party, and thus the battle is as good as won. The reality, however, is that not every strike is conscious, and thus the role of the party is to raise the consciousness of, and give direction to, the working class. It cannot perform this task if its own consciousness is diluted. The party is the *vanguard* of the class that has set about the serious task of overthrowing the bourgeoisie, not simply a loose collection of anyone vaguely opposed to 'the system'. As Stalin put it in [The Foundations of Leninism](#): "The party is the general staff of the proletariat." Lenin explained: "The stronger our party organisations, consisting of real social democrats, the less wavering and instability there is within the party, the broader, more varied, richer, and more fruitful will be the party's influence on the elements of the working-class masses surrounding it and guided by it."

The fight against anarchism and amateurishness in matters of organisation

Lenin demonstrated that, no matter how strong its political programme, a lack of seriousness on questions of organisation can totally undermine the effectiveness of a party and render it incapable of putting its programme into practice. The strength of the political programme is greatly reduced if it is not combined with a strong, disciplined organisation fit to lead the working class. Highlighting the profound importance of a rigorous constitution and rules, Lenin showed that this is the basis on which to build organisation rather than anarchy; that the true proletarian party is characterised by professionalism rather than amateurishness. He refuted the allegation made by the individualist and anarchic party members that such a constitution and rules prevent democracy. On the contrary, he said, they are an organisational weapon, a means of enforcing both democracy and centralism within the party. "[Party unity] requires ... unity of organisation, which, in a party that has grown to be anything more than a mere family circle, is inconceivable without formal rules, without the subordination of the minority to the majority and of the part to the whole."

The struggle after the congress

Lenin and the Bolsheviks were able to win a majority of the votes at the congress, thereby giving them a majority on

both the central committee and the editorial board of Iskra. In the spirit of unity, they also made arrangements for the Mensheviks to be represented on these bodies. But, rather than work as part of a minority subject to the decisions of the party congress, the Mensheviks, together with some vacillating elements including Leon Trotsky, formed an anti-party faction. They accused Lenin of being a bureaucrat, on account of his insisting on adhering to principles of party discipline and opposing the 'freedom of the individual' that would enable members to act contrary to party decisions. In the struggle that ensued, [Georgi Plekhanov](#), the father of Russian socialism, who had taken a good position at the congress itself, succumbed to opportunism. In his desire to avoid a split in the party, he capitulated to the reactionary minority and in the end became part of the split, but on the wrong side. He decided that he could not bear to "fire on his comrades", that 'rather than have a split, it is better to put a bullet in one's brain', and that, to avert a greater evil, it was necessary to make the maximum personal concession". As Lenin pointed out, it was not personal concessions that were at issue. The opportunists were stamping their feet and refusing to play unless congress decisions were ignored, and Plekhanov was helping a small group of opportunists hold the party to ransom and keep it in the organisational dark ages. The practical result of Plekhanov's capitulation was that the Bolsheviks' majority on the editorial board of Iskra was lost to the opportunists. This marked the beginning of the downward slide of Iskra, which quickly sank into outright opportunism under the control of the Mensheviks, becoming known as the 'new' Iskra to distinguish its political line from the previous revolutionary politics of the 'old' Iskra under Lenin. The Bolsheviks retained the majority on the central committee. Lenin himself left the editorial board rather than be party to violation of congress decisions and the battle for the correct line in the party became the battle between the central committee and the new Iskra. Although not dealt with in *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*, we know that the outcome of this battle was a victory for the Bolsheviks, ensuring that the party was based not only on a strong political programme but also on sound organisation, the essence of which was democratic centralism (ie, democratic debate of important political issues, followed by the adoption of – and adherence to – the majority line by the whole party).

Organisation, our primary weapon against capital

In summary, the form that our organisation takes is not an incidental matter. If we wish to build be a party that is fit to lead the working class to victory we must have a centralised organisation, able to weld all the forces at its disposal into a unified fighting machine. The congress of 1903 was not a small group of people engaged in sterile argument over theory: they were arguing over what was the correct theory and practice to underpin a revolutionary party that would be capable of leading the movement up to and beyond the great [October Revolution](#) of 1917. As Lenin so eloquently concluded in *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*: "In its struggle for power the proletariat has no other weapon but organisation. Disunited by the rule of anarchic competition in the bourgeois world, ground down by forced labour for capital, constantly thrust back to 'lower depths' of utter destitution, savagery, and degeneration, the proletariat can, and inevitably will, become an invincible force only through its ideological unification on the principles of Marxism being reinforced by the material unity of organisation, which welds millions of toilers into an army of the working class." The lessons of *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* must be studied and applied by revolutionaries worldwide if they are serious in wishing to defeat imperialism.

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