

Proletarian Unity League

2, 3, Many Parties of a New Type? Against the Ultra-Left Line

The Present Situation in the U.S. Communist Movement And Our Strategic Tasks

B. Strategic Periods in the Struggle for the Party

In the last section, we argued that "win over the vanguard -- propaganda is primary" cannot serve as a strategic slogan to guide our present activity. We saw that at different points, the main form of activity will shift even within the first strategic stage of establishing a Communist Party. In this section, we will examine the causes for changes in the main forms of activity. To do that, we will look at the way in which a single strategic stage breaks down into several strategic periods.

Reflecting on the growth of the Russian workers' movement, Lenin provides a key to understanding the relationship between **stages** in the development of the Party, **forms of activity, and strategic periods** in party-building:

"The development of a mass working-class movement in Russia in connection with the development of Social-Democracy is marked by three notable transitions. The first was the transition from narrow propagandist circles to wide economic agitation among the masses; the second was the transition to political agitation on a large scale and to open street demonstrations; the third was the transition to actual civil war, to direct revolutionary struggle, to the armed popular uprising. **Each of these transitions was prepared, on the one hand, by socialist thought working mainly in one direction, and on the other, by the profound changes that had taken place in the conditions of life and in the whole mentality of the working class, as well as by the fact that increasingly wider strata of the working class were roused to more conscious and active struggle.** Sometimes these changes took place imperceptibly, the proletariat rallying its forces behind the scenes in an unsensational way, so that the intellectuals doubted the lasting quality and the vital power of the mass movement. There would then be a turning point, and the whole revolutionary movement would, suddenly, as it were, rise to a new and higher **stage**. The proletariat and its vanguard, Social-Democracy, would be confronted with new **practical** [Lenin's emphasis] tasks, to deal

with which new forces would spring up, seemingly out of the ground, forces whose existence no one had suspected shortly before the turning point. But all this did not take place at once, without vacillations, **without a struggle of currents within the Social-Democratic movement, without relapses to outworn views long since thought dead and buried.**" (Lenin, **CW 8**, p. 211; emphasis added except where indicated.)

Two factors prepare the transitions from one main form of activity to another: "socialist thought working mainly in one direction," i.e., the relative unity of the revolutionary forces (a subjective factor); and a change "in the conditions of life" of the working class and their spontaneous reflection in its "mentality" (an objective factor). The latter is also affected by a second subjective factor, the rousing of "increasingly wider strata of the working class...to more conscious and active struggle."¹

Neither the stages in the Party's development nor the transitions between main forms of activity, however, define the "turns" or "radical changes" which mark off a **strategic period**, in which the revolutionary forces identify the main enemy to overcome. Lenin refers to these enemies in the above excerpt, and the struggle to overcome them:

"...all this did not take place at once, without vacillations, without a struggle of currents within the Social-Democratic movement, without relapses to outworn views long since thought dead and buried."

In other words, within each stage lie different periods. Strategy for party-building consists in identifying the main enemy in each "period of strategic significance," in order to mobilize all revolutionary forces, win over allies, neutralize all who can be neutralized, utterly isolate the enemy and defeat him.

Lenin's conception of periods emerges more clearly from his discussion of the early life of Russian Social-Democracy. In both **What Is To Be Done?** and the "Preface to the Second Edition of **Tasks of the Russian Social-Democrats**," he outlines four distinct periods covering the years 1884-1902. To explain Lenin's conception, we must include yet another lengthy quotation:

"In all, I named four such periods in the above-mentioned pamphlet (What Is To Be Done?), the last of which referred "to the sphere of the present and, partly, of the future;" the third period was termed that of the domination (or, at least, the wide spread) of the "economist" trend, beginning with 1897-98; the second period was the name given to the years 1894-8, and the first to the years 1884-94. In the second period, in contrast

to the third, we see no disagreements among the Social-Democrats themselves. At that time Social-Democracy was ideologically united, and it was then that an attempt was made to achieve the same unity in practice, in organization (the formation of the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party). At that time the main attention of the Social-Democrats was centered not on clearing up and deciding various internal Party questions (as was the case in the third period) but on the ideological struggle against the opponents of Social-Democracy, on the one hand, and on the development of practical Party work, on the other.

"There was no such antagonism between the theory and the practice of the Social-Democrats as existed in the period of "economism."

"The pamphlet in question reflects the specific features of the situation then and "tasks" of Social-Democracy. It calls for deeper and more widespread practical work, seeing no "obstacles" whatever to this in lack of clarity on any of the general views, principles, or theories, seeing no difficulty (at that time there was none) in combining the political struggle with the economic. It addresses its explanations of principles to adherents of the Narodnaya Volya and the Narodnoye Pravo, who are opposed to Social-Democracy, in an endeavor to dispel the misunderstandings and prejudices which keep them away from the new movement.

"So, at the present time, when the "economist" period is evidently coming to an end, the Social-Democrats' stand is again the same as it was five years ago. Of course, the tasks now confronting us are incomparably more complicated, as a result of the immense growth of the movement during this time, but the principal features of the present period reproduce, on a broader base and on a larger scale, the specific features of the "second" period. The variance between our theory, programme, tactical tasks, and practical activities is disappearing in proportion to the disappearance of "economism." We can and must boldly call again for deeper and more widespread practical work, since the theoretical premises for this work have already been created to a large extent. We must again devote particular attention to non-Social-Democratic illegal trends in Russia, and here we are again confronted with trends which in essence are the very same as those of the first half of the 1890's-only much more developed, organized, and "mature." " (CW 6, p. 212-13)

Three elements **combine** to characterize a **strategic period** in party-building.

"First, whether or not "disagreements" exist "among the Social-Democrats [today, Marxist-Leninists] themselves," and the ideological nature of these

disagreements. We distinguish the first period Lenin talks about from the third by the nature of the major "disagreement," or principal contradiction, within the revolutionary forces. In the first period,

"The chief ideological obstacle to the spread of Marxism and of the Social-Democratic movement was the Narodnik views which at that time prevailed among the advanced workers and the revolutionary-minded intelligentsia." (**History of the CPSU[B]**, p. 10)

In the third period, on the other hand, Economism posed the main danger to the Marxist movement.

Second, periods change according to the **importance** of the major disagreement with, or main danger to, the proletarian line. The difference between the third and fourth periods depends not on the nature of the main danger (for both, it remains Economism), but rather **on the strength of this danger** in relation to the correct line. When Lenin says,

"The variance between our theory, programme, tactical tasks, and practical activities is disappearing in proportion to the disappearance of "economism,""

he means that the ascendancy of the Marxist line over the economist one marked the beginning of a new period. To use different terms, the relationship of the two aspects in the principal contradiction dividing the revolutionary forces helps determine a strategic period in party-building.

In a period in which the main danger constitutes the principal aspect of the principal contradiction, the main strategic task consists in reversing the relation of force between the principal and secondary aspects of the principal contradiction. Strategy aims to defeat the "concrete, present enemy," preparing the conditions for a transition to the next period. Thus Lenin defines the main strategic task of the third period as putting an end to it:

But we firmly believe that the fourth period will lead to the consolidation of militant Marxism, that Russian Social-Democracy will emerge from the crisis in the full flower of manhood, that the opportunist rearguard will be "replaced" by the genuine vanguard of the most revolutionary class.

In the sense of calling for such a "replacement" and by way of summing up what has been expounded above, we may meet the question. What is to be Done? with the brief reply:

"Put an End to the Third Period." (**CW 5**, pp. 519-520)

Once the communist forces have succeeded in unifying their ranks around a correct line, the focus of the ideological struggle shifts from internal Party questions to the fight against non-Marxist trends in the workers' movement. A renewed emphasis on expanding communist influence among the workers accompanies this shift. For example, Lenin states that in the second period, a period of relative unity, "the main attention...centered...on the ideological struggle against the opponents of Social-Democracy, on the one hand, and on the development of practical Party work, on the other."

Third, the level of fusion of Marxism-Leninism with the workers' movement also determines a strategic period. As an example of the interaction of these three determinations, let us consider the activities of the Russian Social-Democrats around 1895.

The passage quoted earlier from the **History of the CPSU(B)** gives 1895 as the year all the Marxist workers' circles in St. Petersburg united. Lenin then "proposed to pass from the **propaganda** of Marxism among the few...to political **agitation** among the broad masses of the working class...." Three factors combined to make agitation the main form of activity, even though 1895 certainly fell within the first stage in the development of the Bolshevik Party, when, overall, propaganda was the main form of activity.

First, the main danger came from Narodnik-inspired views, with their "lofty contempt for practical work displayed by...worshipper[s] of the absolute" (Lenin, CW 5, p. 519) and their abandonment of mass revolutionary work (see **HCPSU[B]** p. 8). By itself, this would not call for a shift to agitation as the main form of activity, since it also held true in the first period. But unlike the first period, there existed "no disagreements among the Social-Democrats themselves," i.e., "socialist thought worked mainly in one direction." The Marxist line constituted the principal aspect of the principal contradiction. Because of this second factor, Social-Democrats did not need to devote their main attention to "clearing up and deciding various internal Party questions." In this situation, Lenin emphasized "the **practical** side of Social-Democracy, because on the theoretical side the most critical period...is now apparently behind us..." (CW 2, p. 327) Lenin dates the unity which enabled the Social-Democrats to turn to the "practical side" from 1894. But this ideological unity only took an organizational form in 1895, with the founding of the St. Petersburg League of Struggle. Even though socialist thought worked mainly in one direction in 1894, that did not suffice for a turn to agitation as the main form of activity. That turn awaited a single organization with "the ability to agitate among the masses and lead them which is characteristic of the advanced workers." (CW 4, p. 360) Because of this third factor, in conjunction with the other two, Lenin argued for a shift in the main form of activity. This advance in the union of Marxism

with the workers' movement was in turn cemented by the great strikes of 1895-96.

A few years later, the second period gave way to the third, in which propaganda was again the main form of activity. Although the mass strike wave had receded, no evidence exists to suggest that the union of Marxism and the workers' movement grew more tenuous in the third period as compared to the second. In fact, despite the arrest of the Social-Democratic leadership, Lenin says the opposite: "the movement itself continued to grow, and it advanced with enormous strides." (CW 5, p. 518) But the rise of a new and powerful threat to Marxist unity overshadowed the deepening fusion of Marxism with the workers' movement. A new principal contradiction superseded the contradiction with Narodnik-inspired views. And the new main danger, Economism, now dominated Lenin's Marxist line. Socialist thought no longer "worked mainly in one direction" (by which we must understand one **correct** direction, since if socialist thought works mainly in one incorrect direction, it does not serve the cause of socialism). A period of "disunity, dissolution, and vacillation" began in which the main attention of the Social-Democrats returned to "clearing up and deciding various internal Party questions."²

A definition of the current strategic period in the U.S. communist movement must include all three sets of determinations: the principal contradiction moving forward the party-building process; the relation of aspects in this principal contradiction (whether the Marxist-Leninist line plays the leading or subordinate role); and the degree of union of Marxism-Leninism and the workers' movement. From this definition we can derive a strategy for party-building in the present period, including the main task of the period, the immediate danger against which we direct the main blow, and the main form of activity. A strategy needs to take into account the strengths of various tendencies, the forces and factors favoring unity and favoring division, and the ideological sources of various deviations. Further, since the struggle for the Party proceeds unevenly on different fronts-ideological, political, and organizational--strategy and tactics for party-building must also identify which of these three levels is currently the main site of struggle. Before describing the current situation in the U.S. communist movement, we need more clarity on the nature of the Party itself.

Footnotes

¹Although Lenin here refers to these transitions as transitions between "stages, " these "stages" are not the major stages in the development of the Party described by Lenin and Stalin earlier: the stage of winning the vanguard to communism; the stage of rallying the masses around the

position of the vanguard; and the stage in which the proletariat exercises state power through its Party. Both Lenin and Stalin speak of the second stage as one marked by revolutionary mass struggle. In other words, agitation as the main form of activity largely belongs to the first stage, and Stalin describes the second stage as one in which "the Party was transformed **from an organization for mass agitation** into an organization for mass action." (CW 5, p. 88). Furthermore, the transition from "wide economic agitation" to "political agitation on a wide scale and to open street demonstrations" can imply an economist stage theory totally at variance with Leninist practice, and should not be considered a separate transition in theory, though it did occur in the Russian party-building experience.

During the time in which Russian Social-Democrats gave priority to propaganda work, they sometimes tended to shun all agitational work (hence Lenin's description of "narrow propagandist circles"). When they later passed over to agitation as the main form of activity, they experienced a tendency to ignore propaganda work, particularly theoretical struggle (cf. the opening sections of **What Is To Be Done?**). This second error helped the rise of Economism, which led to taking economic agitation as the sole form of activity, to the exclusion not only of propaganda but also of political agitation.

In sum, we take these transitions as ones between main forms of activity, and not between stages in the Party's development.

²Despite the terminological difference, the definition of **strategic periods** in party-building we set out above clarifies Stalin's outline of "stages in the Party's development up to 1917."

- a) **Welding of the main core, especially the "Iskra" group**, and so forth. Fight against Economism. The Credo.
- b) **Formation of Party cadres** as the basis of the future workers' party on an all-Russian scale (1895-1903). The Second Party Congress.
- c) **The expansion of the cadres into a workers' party** and its reinforcement with new Party workers recruited in the course of the proletarian movement (1903-04). The Third Party Congress.
- d) **The fight of the Mensheviks against the Party cadres with the object of dissolving the latter among the non-Party masses** (the "Labor Congress") and the fight of the Bolsheviks to preserve the Party cadres as the basis of the Party. The London Congress and defeat of the advocates of a Labor Congress.
- e) **Liquidators and Party Supporters**. Defeat of the Liquidators (1908-10).

f) 1908-16 inclusive. **The period of the combination of illegal and legal forms** of activity and the growth of the Party organizations in all spheres of activity." (CW 5, p. 72)

Stalin's breakdown of this history into "stages" reflects the several determinations entering into a given **strategic period** in party-building. The first four "stages" fall into what Stalin generally calls the first period in the Party's development, or what we call the first stage. Both the first two and the second two "stages" overlap chronologically. "Stages" b) and c) are characterized mainly by the degree of union of Marxism-Leninism and the workers' movement in Russia. (Stalin's "stage" b] includes the last three **periods** discussed by Lenin in **WITBD?** and CW 6, pp. 212-13.) "Stage" d), on the other hand, is characterized principally by the nature of the main danger, and its importance, and "stage" a) takes into account both kinds of determinations. The last two "stages" have a similar interrelationship. Stalin's "stages" overlap chronologically in order to represent the several elements which combine to give a **strategic period** in the history of a Party. The time covered by each pair of "stages" is not identical, however, in order to represent both the periods when the main danger constituted the principal aspect of the contradiction with the proletarian line--periods in which the Social-Democrats had to "clear up and decide various internal Party questions" (stages a], d], and e])-- and the periods when the proletarian line constituted the principal aspect, in which the Social-Democrats engaged in "deeper and more widespread practical work," strengthening the union of Marxism-Leninism and the workers' movement ("stages" b], c], and f]).