

# Lenin's Conception of the Party

By F. BROWN

**T**O fulfill its historic task as the driving force in the revolutionary struggle, the proletariat must develop its own organization which will embrace the most advanced and conscious strata of the working class and put itself at the head of the toiling masses against their oppressors. This organization takes the form of an organized, revolutionary political Party.

It is only on this basis that the proletariat can be victorious, in so far as it is only such a Party that is able to see further ahead than the rest of the workers, that sees where capitalism is leading, that is able to analyze the political situation, to understand the interest of the working class and guide it in its daily struggles along the revolutionary path for the overthrow of capitalism.

Lenin writes:

"The proletariat has no other weapon in the struggle for power except organization. . . . In order that the mass of people belonging to a certain class might learn to understand their interest, their position, to pursue their policy, it is necessary immediately and at all costs to organize the advanced element of the class, even should this element originally constitute an insignificant fraction of the class. . . . Our Party is a union of the class conscious advanced fighters for the emancipation of the working class. . . . The Party is the class conscious, advanced section of the class, its vanguard. The power of this vanguard is ten, hundred and more times, as great as its number."

Lenin, of course, does not stop here, but adds that without revolutionary theory there cannot be a revolutionary movement. It is only the Party, guided by revolutionary theory, that can solve the task of the vanguard fighters. Here we see Lenin as the creator of the theory of the revolutionary party of the proletariat.

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The parties of the Second and "Second-and-a-Half" International have maintained that they are defending the proletariat. They write on their banners the slogans of the defense of the working class, and claim to be leaders of the working class. But in reality, when faced with the test in the decisive moment of struggle, they disband and subjectively or objectively go over openly to the side of the bourgeoisie.

Did not the Mensheviks pass over to the side of the counter-revolution? Were not the English Laborites, when in power, the managers of the capitalist State, of the British Empire? Did not the Italian Socialists (the Maximalists), confused on the problem of the Italian revolution, on the necessity of cleansing the party of reformism, on the problem of the violent seizure of power, capitulate and bring about the defeat of the Italian proletariat? Did not the German Social-Democratic Party, after paving the way to fascism on the basis of the theory of the "lesser evil," collapse when Hitler took power, rejecting the united front, knifing the general strike? And the Socialist Party in the United States, is it not directly helping the reactionary leadership of the A. F. of L. in chaining the American working class to the NRA? Are not its leaders giving advice to the Roosevelt administration?

And what is the Second International doing? What are the various "independent" Socialist Parties doing—the various groups and grouplets, at a moment in which the capitalist terror is reaching its highest point, when a new world slaughter is approaching, when the imperialist powers are frantically looking for a united front to attack the Soviet Union? While the Second International still supports the League of Nations and the "peace" conferences, it is the standard-bearer of the arbitration policies, confusing the workers and helping capitalism, its only real struggle being directed against the Communist Party, the only Party of the working class. The other groups outside of the Second International (I.L.P., Maximalists, Musteites, etc.) with their policy of hindering the trend toward the unity of their members, the trend towards the Third International, with their opposition and continuous attacks against the Communist International, are marching at the tail of the Second International and through their left phraseology are splitting the ranks of the working class.

The parties of the Second International and other so-called "Workers' Parties" (Catholics, Farmer Labor, etc.), notwithstanding the fact that part of their membership belongs to the working class, are in reality, because of their policies (collaborationism, arbitration councils, etc.), supporting factors of the capitalist order and are simply reduced to fractions of the bourgeois party. If this does not appear clearly on the surface because of the apparent division, it manifests itself especially at the moment when the bourgeoisie as a bloc defends its own existence. A typical example is given by fascism. In all countries where fascism rules we see all the fractions of the bourgeoisie united in the party of the bourgeois dictatorship, in fascism. Many of the petty-bourgeois elements who once were lead-

ers in various "workers' parties" are today in the ranks of fascism, are the standard bearers of class collaboration, the translation of which is bourgeois dictatorship.

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The Communist Party is the only real vanguard of the working class, the only party of the proletariat leading towards the dictatorship of the proletariat. It is the only instrument of the proletarian revolution insuring the transition to socialism. It makes possible the only form of proletarian democracy, insofar as only the dictatorship of the proletariat can represent and give true liberty to the large toiling masses constituting the overwhelming majority of the population.

Of course, it is not the Communist Party that makes the revolution, that takes power; but it is the working class backed by the broad masses of those who labor and are oppressed or exploited by capitalism. The Party acts as its leader and general staff. The working class without the revolutionary Party is an army without a general staff.

The strength of the Party consists in its clear class policies, in its strong ties with the masses, in its inner unity, in its discipline, in its struggle against opportunist deviations.

At this point it is necessary to emphasize the important role played by the leaders. While the Party is the vanguard of the working class, the leaders are the most advanced elements of this vanguard, the most devoted, developed and experienced in the course of the struggle, those that have been tested by the masses in the course of many years. The bourgeoisie understands very well that the role of the leaders is an essential element in the development of the revolutionary movement, and for this reason, strives systematically to deprive the working class of its leaders. Lenin's conception was that the Party must have an apparatus of professional revolutionists "who devote themselves entirely to the revolution, who are free from other non-revolutionary duties, who may at any time freely migrate from place to place, change their mode of life, and even the name they go by, in a word, of people who have chosen the revolution as their only profession." He continuously fought against any deviation from this line. Especially in 1920 did he fight against the group of Left-wing Communists in Germany who sharply opposed the necessity for leaders of the revolutionary labor movement, basing themselves on the theory that the entire power rests in the masses.

Because the Bolshevik Party possessed such qualities it was able to lead the Russian proletariat to victory. The Russian proletariat

was able to defeat the bourgeoisie, first, because during the previous years of struggle under the guidance of Lenin, it succeeded in forging a vanguard of steel which was able to work out a clear and perfect program, and secondly, because the great masses learned to consider the Bolshevik Party as their only general staff.

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The Party, to be the vanguard of the proletariat, must also be the organized detachment of its class. Only if well organized and disciplined, will the Party be able to accomplish its tasks, especially during difficult periods.

Comrade Stalin writes:

“The distinction between the vanguard and the main body of the working class, between Party members and non-Party members, will continue as long as classes exist, as long as the proletariat will continue replenishing its ranks with new comers from other classes, as long as the working class as a whole is deprived of the opportunity of raising itself to the level of the vanguard. But the Party would cease to be a Party if this distinction were widened into a rupture; if it were to isolate itself and break away from the non-Party masses. The Party cannot lead the class if it is not connected with the non-Party masses, if there is no close union between the Party and the non-Party masses, if these masses do not accept its leadership, if the Party does not enjoy moral and political authority among the masses.”

As early as 1902, in *What Is To Be Done*, Lenin laid down the main conception of the type of party needed by the working class. An organization that shall

“... secure a flexibility necessary for a social-democratic militant organization, *i.e.*, an ability quickly to readjust itself to the most diverse and rapidly changing conditions of struggle, an ability to evade a battle in the open field against an overwhelming enemy that has gathered all of its forces at one point, on the one hand, and, on the other, to take advantage of the clumsiness of this enemy and attack him when and where he is least prepared for such an attack.”

In 1915, enriched by the experiences of more than a decade of struggle, and especially by the experiences of the 1905 revolution, of the years following the revolution of 1914, Lenin characterized still more eloquently the type of Party that must perform the role of the vanguard of the working class, of a Party able to adapt its structure, its technique, its apparatus, to the condition of the struggle.

"Let us take," Lenin said, "a modern army, here is a good example of organization. This organization is good simply because it is flexible, because it knows how to impart a single will to millions of people. Today, these millions sit in their various homes at the different ends of the country. Tomorrow, a mobilization order is issued and they gather at appointed places. Today, they lie in trenches, sometimes for months at a stretch. Tomorrow, in a re-arranged order, they march forward to storm the enemy. Today, they perform miracles in evading bullets and shrapnel. Tomorrow, they perform miracles in open battles. Today, their advance posts lay mines under the ground; tomorrow, they cover dozens of miles in accordance with instructions from flyers in the air. That is what you call organization, when *in the name of one object inspired by a single will, millions of people change the form of their intercourse and action, the place and methods of their activity, their weapons and arms, in accordance with the changing circumstances and demands of the struggle.*" (Emphasis mine—F.B.)

It was such a type of organization that withstood all waves of reaction and of terror and led the toiling masses of Russia to victory. It is such a Party that, following Lenin's teachings, withstands the terrific waves of fascist terror in Italy, Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary; that gives the iron vanguard in the Chinese Soviet territory the power to withstand all the offensives of the reactionary Kuomintang; that today, in spite of the most bloody terror, and the loss of thousands upon thousands of its best fighters, gives the Communist Party of Germany the cement to keep its ranks together, to strengthen itself, to tie itself more and more closely to the toiling masses in the places of work, and to lead the daily struggles of the oppressed masses; while the so-called labor parties, the Socialist Parties, disintegrate and collapse at the first wave of reaction.

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It was on the basis of this type of party and the concrete experiences between 1902 and 1905 that Lenin, at the Third Congress in London, and at the Fourth United Congress in Stockholm (1905-1906), laid down the five fundamental organizational principles which are in full force in the World Communist Party. The first defines the activity of Party members as direct participants in the Party work; the second is the principle of Communist discipline, combined with the free discussion of problems inherent in the Party and the condition of submission of the minority to the majority; the third *establishes centralism, combined with democratism, with the elective principle*; the fourth defines the foundation of the Party, its citadel in the factory, the lower nuclei of the Party; the fifth

sets forth the Party tasks in all working class organizations—trade unions, cooperatives, etc., through the Communist fractions.

The first principle was expressed in the following terms:

“Anyone who accepts its program and supports the Party both by material means as well as by personal participation in one of its organizations is considered a member of the Party.”

This principle was made more definite in 1906, and later, in 1917 at the Sixth Congress of the Russian Communist Party, it was formulated as follows:

“Anyone is considered a member of the Party who accepts its program, who is an active member in one of its organizations, who executes all decisions, and pays his membership dues.”

This fundamental principle contrasts with the opportunist stand of the Mensheviks and of Trotsky, who were fighting for a system that would have opened the doors wide to professionals and students, to anybody who would accept simply the program in principle, but was not willing to belong to and be active in a Party organization.

It is clear that in following the principles of Martov and Trotsky, the Party would have absorbed the most heterogeneous elements and would have ended where the German Social-Democracy did.

The Menshevik ideal is to make of the Party a loose organization in which all currents have equal rights. In Social Democracy we can find tens of tendencies, tens of schools of “Marxist” interpretation, of revisionism of Marxism. The organizational principle laid down by Lenin is of the utmost political importance. It flows out of the program of the Communist Party.

The Leninist Party cannot permit the rotten liberalism advocated by the Social Democrats. Our Party is not a club for perpetual discussion. It is for this reason that the organizational problem is put by the Communist Party as a question of principle that makes the Party the instrument of working class hegemony in the revolutionary struggle.

In order that the Party be able to develop its activity as the vanguard of the working class, it is necessary that every member give his maximum of activity, not only to the organizational work of the Party, but especially to the penetration of the Party into the masses, to the establishment of the Party in the factories. Our work must be concrete work, persistent work, the work of everyday activity. We must separate those who are active in the daily work from those who merely talk. We must destroy the petty individual-

ism in our ranks, the petty-bourgeois opportunism; we must learn to work collectively for the program of the Party.

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The principle determining the duties of the Party members, their activity and their obedience to decisions, is closely linked with the second principle of democratic centralism and discipline. What is democratic centralism?

“Democratic centralism is based, on the one hand, on the system of subordinating the lower organs to the higher, leading up to the Central Committee of the Party, to whom all the lower organizations, as a whole, are subordinated; on the other hand, this centralism is democratic, in so far as all the organs of the Party, from the top to the bottom, are elective and all the local organizations are autonomous on local questions, *i.e.*, they are enabled to develop the maximum of self-activity within the limits of the general directives given by the higher organs of the Party.”—Kaganovitch, *Organization Structure of the Russian Communist Party*.

Democratic centralism is also the guiding principle of the organizational structure of the Party which secures real unity of the Party, led by the center from the bottom up. The lowest organization of the Party directly connected with the masses in their daily work is the nucleus composed of the Communists in a given factory, mill, village, neighborhood. The nuclei elect their buros, which can be reelected at any time. Groups of nuclei constitute a section which elects, at its convention, the section committee. Several sections comprise a district which elects the district committee. The general Party convention elects the central committee. Each Party body is responsible for its activity to the entire organization and to the higher Party body. This form of democracy of electing the higher body of the Party is, however, “not something absolute that holds good for all times and conditions, because there are moments when it is neither possible nor expedient to apply it.” (Stalin.) It is obvious that at a time when the Party is underground, when the Party organization must be protected from the blows of terror, democracy must be restricted, and centralism strengthened.

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The constant duty of the vanguard is to raise the level of the vast strata of workers higher and higher, until they reach the level of the vanguard. To reach such an objective, it is necessary, not only to raise to consciousness of the individual members of the Party through continuous education combined with everyday work, but to have the most rigid discipline, which is not coercive, but consciously developed on the basis of the ideological unity and organizational structure of the Party.

"We must always keep in mind that an army of 600,000 men [the members of the C.P. of Russia in 1922] must be the vanguard of the working class, and that without an iron discipline it would not have been possible to accomplish our task." (Lenin.)

As early as 1920 Lenin wrote on the same subject:

"The experiences of the victorious Dictatorship of the Proletariat in Russia clearly showed to those who are unable to think and who do not have to think about this question, that absolute centralization and the strictest discipline among the proletariat are one of the fundamental conditions of its victory over the bourgeoisie."

When the Mensheviks, in bringing forward their liberalism, attacked Lenin on this point, maintaining that a military regime cannot be the regime of a proletarian party, and that the factory cannot serve as the type for the party, Lenin answered that precisely the factory represents the superior form of capitalist cooperation, which has united and disciplined the proletariat, taught it organization, and put it at the head of all the other sections of the exploited toiling masses.

"Discipline and organization, so indigestible to the bourgeois intellectuals, are particularly easily assimilated by the proletariat by the very fact of factory schooling."

Discipline is the first condition of unity of the Party; not formal unity, but concrete unity based on ideological unity, on Bolshevik will and action. To the questions: How is discipline maintained within the revolutionary Party of the proletariat? What controls this discipline and what strengthens it?—Lenin answers:

"First of all, there is the class consciousness of the proletarian vanguard, its devotion to the revolution, its self-control, its self-sacrifice, its heroism. Secondly, there is the capacity of the proletarian vanguard for linking itself with, for keeping in close touch with, for to some extent amalgamating with, the broad masses of those who labor, primarily with the proletarian masses, but also with the non-proletarianized masses of those who labor. Thirdly, we have the soundness of the vanguard's political leadership, the soundness of its political strategy and tactic, with the provision that the broad masses must become convinced by their own experience that the leadership, the strategy and the tactic are sound. Unless these conditions are fulfilled, there is no possibility of achieving the discipline which is indispensable for a revolutionary party that shall be able to become the party of the most advanced class, the party whose task it is to overthrow the bourgeoisie and to transform the whole of society. . . . On the other hand, these

conditions cannot be fulfilled betwixt night and morning. Much labor and pains, hard-won experience, will be required. Their fulfillment must be guided by accurate revolutionary theory, which, however, must never harden into dogma, but must always be formulated in close touch with the practical activity of the masses and the daily work of the revolutionary movement."

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Discussion, which is a necessary means of working out and clarifying the line, and making decisions, is necessary to raise the Communist consciousness of Party members. It is the medium for the expression of opinion on the greatest possible number of questions, with the intent of raising the ability of the Party organizations, and the individual members, and of tying them closer and closer to the toiling masses. Such discussion raises, not only the activities, but the political level of Party members. The Party encourages discussion on questions where there are different points of view; far from prohibiting sound criticism of the leading organizations of the Party it bases itself on the position that discussions insure the correctness of the policies of the Party, that they insure the Party against errors.

For this reason the most fundamental questions are submitted to the entire membership; other urgent questions, which cannot be submitted for general discussion, are decided upon by the leading organs, especially by the Central Committee. Criticism of the mistakes of the Party policy by the organizations and by individual members is necessary; but it must be constructive criticism, aiming at overcoming the errors or weaknesses. Criticism cannot, however, be allowed to degenerate into license that violates the discipline or breaks the unity of the Party. In our Party, decisions must be observed and carried out even when individuals or groups do not fully agree with them.

"He who causes the least relaxation of the iron discipline of the Party of the proletariat (particularly at the time of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat), is in fact helping the bourgeoisie against the proletariat." (Lenin.)

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This warning of Lenin's in his *Infantile Sickness of Left Communism* must be kept in mind by every Communist. In capitalist countries especially, our Party must be on guard against the pene-

tration of petty bourgeois influence, against which, in particular, Lenin warned.

Today, in a period in which the crisis of capitalism is deepening, the class struggle sharpening, a new world slaughter approaching, the Communist Party must be an iron Party more than ever before.

On the tenth anniversary of the death of Lenin, the leader of the World Party of the Proletariat, we should be spurred on by his fundamental lesson:

“Without an iron Party, hardened in the struggle, without a Party enjoying the confidence of all the honest elements of the class, without a Party capable of keeping in touch with the sentiment of the masses and influencing them, it is impossible successfully to conduct such a struggle.”

In the light of this teaching we must build our Party into a mass proletarian Party, rooted in the factories, rooted among the toiling masses, to steel it in the daily struggle, to equip it for the approaching struggles in this period of new wars and revolutions, of the maturing world revolutionary crisis.

It is only by following the teachings of Lenin that we will be able to accomplish our revolutionary tasks.