

Reply to Cvfan and Art -- revolutionary organization and mission statement

Ben Seattle - May 18, 2020

https://www.reddit.com/r/Marxists_USCA/comments/gm7b25/reply_to_cvfan_and_art_revolutionary_organization/

First, I would like to thank both Cvfan and Art for their contributions to this discussion, which I read with great interest.

(1) Cvfan raised the issue of how a revolutionary organization can defend itself from the pressure of what he termed "alien middle-class influences" and cites the organizational principle (associated with the practice of "democratic centralism") that the destiny of an organization can only be voted on by those who actually do the work to build it.

Cvfan also notes that Lenin and the Bolsheviks found ways to work with "activists they had disagreements with in meaningful ways".

(2) Art replied that the issue of organizational self-defense is real (and cited the experience of the Marxist Humanist group to illustrate this in a concrete way) but noted another problem that is not solved by the requirement that supporters of an organization need to work to get the right to vote:

- > you cannot build a revolutionary party
- > without revolutionaries, and revolutionaries
- > have a long history of not communicating
- > well with each other
- > ...
- > It doesn't solve the problem of
- > revolutionaries not communicating with
- > each other or working with each other
- > in a healthy way to make headway to
- > building a revolutionary organization
- > that can become an actual opposition
- > to the bourgeois parties and ideologies

(3) The problem of the isolation of revolutionary activists from one another is real, and there can be no real motion forward until this is overcome.

And this will not be overcome simply by activists working together on various campaigns for partial demands.

Rather, it requires that activists also work together to resolve the deeper problems of our movement -- and develop a clear and compelling consensus on:

- (a) where our movement needs to go, and
- (b) how it will get there

It is not uncommon in our movement, at this time, for activists to be driven into the hands of cults (and engage in cult-like behavior) by the fear, discomfort, powerlessness and extreme loneliness of isolation.

(4) If we study how Lenin solved the twin problems of:

- (a) resisting alien class influences
(ie: what can loosely be considered reformism) and
- (b) overcoming the mutual isolation of activists
(ie: what can loosely be considered sectarianism)

we will learn that Russian revolutionaries came up with what (in retrospect) was the obvious solution: an organization that existed within a larger organization. Or, in slightly different words, a party within a party (please see the chart below).

Between roughly 1903 and 1912 the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) developed two poles: a reformist pole and a revolutionary pole (ie: the mensheviks and the bolsheviks).

At the end of this 10 year period, the maturation of both the objective conditions and the subjective consciousness of the workers in Russia had reached a point where there was no longer any need for an

umbrella organization that included both poles--because the lengthy period of a party-within-a-party had solved this problem: revolutionary activists had overcome their mutual isolation and workers had learned in a fairly clear way about the distinction between reformist and revolutionary politics (ie: principles, practices and ideology).

(5) It is important to recognize that what became the bolshevik party could not have developed by somehow skipping over the decade in which there was a party within a party.

Today's supporters of the unipolar model of revolutionary organization (of which I assume Cvfan is one) often imagine that there is no need to go through this stage--because "it has already happened". But that is not how life (and the class struggle) unfolds.

People (and classes) learn from experience.

The experience of Russian workers and activists a hundred years ago cannot be somehow magically transported (by repeating phrases, like "political subordination to the class interests of the proletariat", that supposedly have magic power) into the minds of workers and activists here in the U.S. and Canada.

Workers and activists (here and now) will only learn about the distinction between reformist and revolutionary politics through years of bitter experience. This does not mean that we should fold our arms and wait for this. On the contrary we must take an active and partisan stand in the struggle between reformist and revolutionary politics--and make use of every opportunity to raise the consciousness of workers about the treachery of social democratic (ie: reformist) politics and the need for class-independent politics.

But this does mean that **the lengthy process of sorting out who (and what) is reformist and who (or what) is revolutionary cannot be skipped over**. The reformists do not all wear little blue hats that say "long live reformism and social democracy!". And those who proclaim the loudest that they are revolutionaries--are often adults who act like children.

(6) My efforts to apply the lessons of the party-within-a-party decade in Russia have revolved around making use of modern communications to help put all activists on (so to speak) the same page (please see the 2nd chart below).

Disciplined work teams would be free to organize themselves--but easy and systematic communication between activists would be possible with a lot less friction for those activists who are unclear on the nature of the various competing trends within the open public network.

(7) Speaking of friction--Art raised this idea in his response to Cvfan:

- > Neither technology nor organizational rules can
- > manifest teamwork, they can only lubricate it,
- > making it easier.

Art, of course, is correct. It is always the human element (ie: human labor) that makes things move. But machines (and I believe that we can consider both rules and technology to represent a form of machine) can amplify the power of the human element--sometimes considerably.

(8) Art talked of the need for:

- (a) the slow and patient task of building relationships,
- (b) lines of communication,
- (c) common work projects, and
- (d) comradery

and I feel proud to be associated with activists who recognize and can talk about such things.

But I would like to be more concrete.

At present, the "Marxist Line" program remains in its infancy, and whether it will be able to live up to its name remains unclear, because (among other things) that is a hell of a name to live up to.

At present, Art and I have different views concerning what principles need to guide the development of the Marxist Line. Not everything is black and white, of course, and at this time it is probably fair to say that while Art and I have differences, we are still struggling to understand:

- (a) what these differences are, and
- (b) how best to resolve them

These differences involve how to best combine what must be the dual function of the Marxist Line:

- (a) serving as an open platform and level playing field providing news and information from all trends which advertise themselves as marxists, and
- (b) taking a partisan stand on the most important questions that are decisive for the health and recovery of our movement.

In particular, taking a partisan stand on the decisive questions requires study, discussion and investigation to help determine:

- (a) what are the decisive questions, and
- (b) what are the answers to these questions

The decisive question are those that go beyond the various struggles for immediate partial demands (although those struggles are important) and relate to (to repeat myself):

- (a) where our movement needs to go and
- (b) how it will get there.

Cvfan contributed to this with his comment on the need for organizational rules.

But the discussion concerning whether or not the working class should consider countries like Vietnam (or Cuba) to be "socialist" is also decisive because our movement cannot get where it needs to go without millions understanding where and what this is--and it is difficult to understand something if we do not have a word to describe it. And if this word has been hijacked by opportunists (ie: reformists, sectarians or alien class forces) we need to either struggle (in a serious way) to grab this word back--or create a new word--because words, by themselves have no magic power--their only real power lies in their ability to communicate clear ideas.

Art and I have agreed that public discussion and debate on the mission statement of the project is a reasonable and principled way to make progress. This process also involves Andrew who appears to be learning quite a lot as it develops.

And this is where I would like to ask Cvfan for some modest help--so I will address myself to him (or her):

To Cvfan: I know that, as an activist familiar with WITBD, you must be busy, and your time is limited. I hope that you will consider the public discussion between Art and Andrew and me to be deserving of attention, reflection and comment--with a view of helping us put together a mission statement that we are all confident serves the independent movement of the working class.

Respectfully,
Ben Seattle

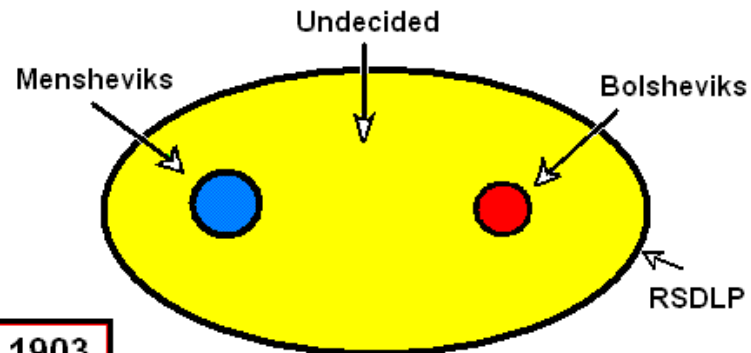
**Why, oh why did the soul plunge
from the upmost heights to the lowest depths?
The seed of redemption is contained in the fall.**
—The Dybbuk, S. Ansky (trans. Golda Werman)

(charts are on the following page)

The Development of the Split in the Russian Party (1903 - 1911)

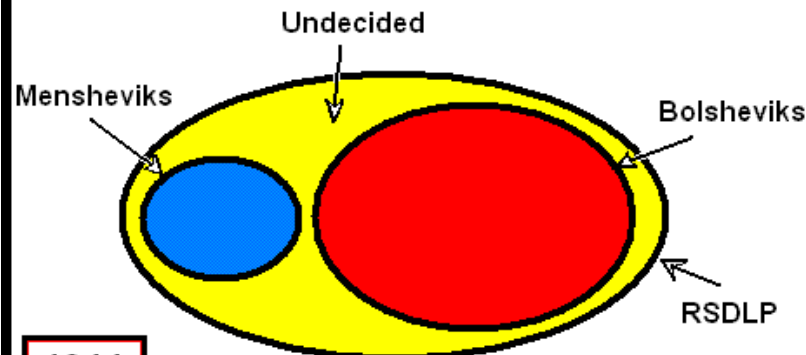
The Russian Social-Democratic Labor party (RSDLP) included Bolsheviks, Mensheviks and Undecided.

Over time, the revolutionary pole wins majority support from the workers while the reformist pole wins greater support from the intermediate classes



1903

Most party supporters unclear on the distinction between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. Workers demand the opposing centers cooperate.



1911

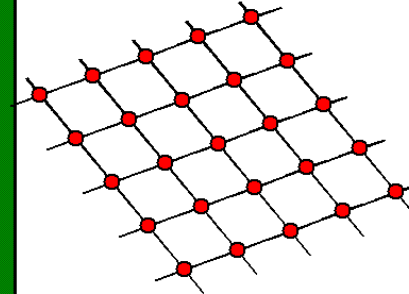
Differentiation complete. Militant workers see no need to cooperate with Mensheviks.

1917

Opposite side of the barricades: Bolsheviks lead revolution against Mensheviks

Proletarian Organization in the Information Age

Unified Open Network



Activists, and their political activity, are visible to one another in ways that are practical and easy.

Revolutionary activists will have a right to be part of this network. The rights and responsibilities that go with being part of this network will be minimal.

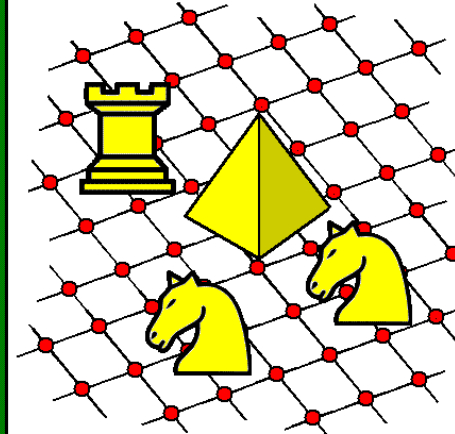
If most people who are part of this network want to do something you think is stupid, you have no obligation to support this.

Disciplined Work Teams



All sorts of teams will emerge from the soil of the unified network. Each team will determine its own destiny. Being part of this team will require being accepted by team members and will carry with it greater rights and responsibilities.

Teams will reflect the culture of political transparency of the larger network and team members will view themselves as being part of the larger network. Many members of the network will be part of several different teams.



The Party of the Working Class

- (1) Participation in the struggles of the working class and masses,
- (2) puncturing the influence of social democracy,
- (3) putting forth a clear vision of a world without bourgeois rule and
- (4) developing common media and channels of communication,

will lead, over time, to a revolutionary mass organization that will be known as the party of the proletariat.