

OUR MOVEMENT 60 YEARS AGO

in parliament. In fact, if a would-be revolutionary organisation could not keep its parliamentarians under control, then it could never carry out a revolution:

Lenin pointed out: "If you said: 'Comrades, workers, we are so weak that we cannot create such a disciplined party that forces its members of parliament to obey it', then the workers would desert you, they would say to themselves: 'How shall we set up the dictatorship of the proletariat with such weak people.?'"

It was significant that it was the weakest and smallest parties at the Congress which were opposed to work in parliament, whilst the stronger ones, including the only one to have ever carried out a revolution, were in favour of it. There was nothing inevitable about revolutionaries ending up as reformists in parliament — it was a reflection of the weakness or strength of the organisation to which they belonged.

And the very fact that revolutionaries had successfully worked in parliament proved that no inevitable degeneration of revolutionaries took place. In Germany, Karl Liebknecht had successfully used parliament as a platform for revolutionary agitation, just as the Bolsheviks had in Russia, or the Communist Party in Bulgaria was doing at the time of the Second Congress itself.

The anti-parliamentarians argued that socialism could never be achieved through parliament, and therefore it was



Sylvia Pankhurst.

useless, if it did not create illusions, to work in parliament. After all, Communists had better things to do than 'waste time on parliamentary elections'.

They were certainly correct to recognise that there could be no parliamentary road to socialism. But the question was how this fact was to be proven to the millions who still had illusions in parliament? Was it to be done by giving lectures on what's wrong with bourgeois democracy, or by exposing the sham nature of parliament from the inside, by "blowing them up from the inside" as Bukharin put it. The history of the Bolshevik Party showed that the latter was the only path to follow:

"How will you reveal the true nature of parliament to the really backward masses deceived by the bourgeoisie if you don't enter it?... the history of the Russian revolution has clearly proved

that the great masses of the working class, of the peasant class and of the petty clerks would not have been convinced by any arguments if they had not made their own experiences." (Lenin)

The anti-parliamentarians believed parliament could be exposed, and socialism achieved by passive lecturing and propagandising. The advocates of revolutionary parliamentarianism recognised that these two tasks could be achieved only by the conscious intervention of revolutionaries answerable to a consistently revolutionary Communist Party. And since the October Revolution had been executed by adopting the latter method of work, the congress called on "all comrades to enter parliament with the cry 'Down with parliamentarianism.'"

The thirteenth session of the congress was dominated by the question of whether the various revolutionary groups in Britain, at that time in the process of fusion to form the Communist Party, should affiliate to the Labour Party. Affiliation had been debated long before the Congress. Sylvia Pankhurst's arguments against affiliation had a certain ring of familiarity about them: "The Labour Party is very large numerically, though its membership is to a great extent quiescent and apathetic, consisting of many workers who have joined the trade unions because their workmates are trade unionists, and to share the friendly benefits... We must not dissipate our energy in adding to the strength of the Labour Party... We must concentrate on making a communist movement that will vanquish it."

At the Congress itself affiliation was argued against for much the same reasons as Pankhurst had put forward in the debate in Britain. Gallacher argued that affiliation would be a diversion from the revolutionary struggle, and that it "would cause the Communist Party to distort its character", whilst Tanner claimed that affiliation "would do great damage to the British Party, for the whole British working class is sick and tired of the tactics of the Labour Party."

Pankhurst argued against affiliation on the grounds that "all members of the parties which belong to the Labour Party are subjected to the strictest discipline," and therefore they would be "forced by membership of the Labour Party" to adopt reactionary politics. Given the connection between the Labour Party and the Unions, affiliation to it would mean handing over the fate of the British working class to the "ossified, bureaucratic trade unions".

But Lenin argued, successfully, in favour of affiliation. The different approaches which had led Lenin and Pankhurst to different conclusions on the question of affiliation were a duplicate of the different approaches to the question of work in parliament. Pankhurst's argument was based on a superstitious fear of what might happen to revolutionaries in the Labour Party and therefore wanted Communists to keep a healthy distance from it. Lenin, on the other hand, wanted communists to fight for the leadership of the British working class inside the Labour Party, just as they should fight inside of Parliament for the same purpose.

Lenin agreed that "The Labour Party is a thoroughly reactionary party, because, although made up of workers, it is led by reactionaries and the worst kind of reactionaries and that, who act quite in the spirit of the bourgeoisie. It is an organisation of the bourgeoisie."

"A party affiliated to the Labour Party is able... to mention the old leaders by name and call them social traitors... In such circumstances it would be a mistake not to join the party"

Lenin

Even so, the Communists should join it in order to reach the workers in the Labour Party and the millions in the trade unions affiliated to the Labour Party. The British Communist Party could be a real workers' party only if it really linked up with the masses and fought against the reactionary, corrupt leaders of the British labour movement. And it was possible to attack these leaders from inside the Labour Party: "a party affiliated to the Labour Party is able, not only to severely criticise, but openly and specifically to mention the old leaders by name and call them social traitors... In such circumstances it would be a mistake not to join the party."

The British Communist Party was not to be a party of propagandists, but a combat organisation fighting to win support for their ideas and drive the agents of the bourgeoisie out of the labour movement. Just as it was necessary to get into parliament to expose the sham of bourgeois democracy, so it was necessary to get into the Labour Party to expose the traitors who led, and lead it: "When communists enjoy such freedom, it is their duty to join the Labour Party."

Apart from a debate about the theses on the agrarian question, the other main debate at the Congress focused on the national and colonial struggles against imperialism. The Second International had never bothered itself with such struggles, but for the Communist International the struggle for socialism was inseparable from the struggle against imperialist oppression.

But the question arose as to which movements in the colonies should be supported by Communists. Originally Lenin had argued for support for "bourgeois-democratic movements", but after discussions with M.N. Roy, an Indian in the Mexican delegation, changed to support only for "national revolutionary movements".

The "non-revolutionary" bourgeois-democratic movements were exemplified by the Congress Party in India, a party of the Indian wealthy classes, which was far from being consistently anti-imperialist: it was more concerned with reaching an amicable agreement with British imperialism than driving it out of India. The same developments had taken place elsewhere, "so that, very often, even perhaps in most cases, the bourgeoisie of the oppressed countries, although they also support national movements, nevertheless fight against all revolutionary movements and revolutionary classes with a certain degree of agreement with the imperialist bourgeoisie, that is to say together with it."

