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Lenin on communist election tactics

written by Struggle - La Lucha
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Reprinted below is a report by William Paul — “Lenin on Communist Tactics in Britain” — that appeared in “The Communist,” published in London in 1920. Struggle-La Lucha believes this report holds useful insights for revolutionaries in the U.S. about relating to the Bernie Sanders election campaign.

In 1920, several revolutionary socialist groups in Britain were working together to form a Communist Party. One of the main obstacles to forming a united party was disagreement on the question of the parliamentary elections and the Labour Party.

The Labour Party was not a revolutionary party. In fact, at the outbreak of World War I, the head of the party resigned to protest the war and Arthur Henderson became head because of his pledge to support the war. Henderson even served in Prime Minister Lloyd George’s war cabinet.

Nevertheless, after the war, Henderson and the Labour Party were running on a democratic socialist platform, which had popular support among the workers.

The question was, should the communists support Henderson and the Labour Party in the elections? Some in the communist grouping said that communists must not

compromise with reformism and take a direct road to revolution.

V.I. Lenin, leader of the socialist revolution in Russia, who had closely followed the working-class movement in Britain, responded in both writings and meetings with British communists. [Lenin wrote](#) that “the British Communists very often find it hard even to approach the masses, and even to get a hearing from them. If I come out as a Communist and call upon them to vote for Henderson and against Lloyd George, they will certainly give me a hearing.” He urged the communists to run their own candidates in the local elections for parliament, who would declare their support for Henderson and the Labour Party.

Lenin noted that the fact that most British workers followed the lead of Henderson and the Labour Party and had not yet had experience of a government composed of people supporting a reformist socialist platform — “an experience which was necessary in Russia so as to secure the mass transition of the workers to communism” — undoubtedly indicated that the British communists should participate in parliamentary action, that they should, from within parliament, help the masses of the workers see the results of a Henderson government in practice, and that they should help Henderson defeat the united forces of Lloyd George, head of the Liberal Party, and Churchill, head of the Conservative (Tory) Party.



Lenin in Red Square, October 1917.

Lenin on Communist Tactics in Britain

By William Paul

The Communist, London, December 2, 1920

I have had a long and interesting interview with Lenin. We spoke on various aspects of the movement, and particularly upon the growth and progress of Communism in Britain. Lenin had read the report of the Communist Unity Convention held in London last August. He said that the verbatim report of the speeches and resolutions

of the Convention showed that the formation of the Communist Party marked an epoch in the history of the British revolutionary movement. ...

Lenin then proceeded to discuss the attitude of the Communist Party towards the Labour Party in view of the much-talked-of forthcoming General Election. His views on the subject showed that he abhors the type of revolutionary who has a canalized, or single track, mind.

Lenin looks upon every weapon as necessary in the conflict with capitalism. To him, as a good student of old Dietzgen, every weapon, every policy, and every problem must be examined in the terms of its relations to the needs of the moment and the means at our disposal. This explains why he does not go out of his way to extol one particular weapon. He clearly realizes the value of revolutionary parliamentary action, but he also understands its limitations as a constructive power in the creation of a Workers Industrial Republic. To Lenin, the test of the real revolutionary Communist is to know when to use a given weapon and when to discard it.

Talking on the Labour Party, Lenin said he was very glad to learn that it had refused to accept the affiliation application of the Communist Party. It was a good move to have applied for affiliation, because the refusal of the Labour Party to accept Communists in its ranks showed the masses exactly where the Labour Party stood.

Henderson had, thus, unwittingly paid a great tribute to the growing power of revolutionary Communism in Britain by being afraid to have aggressive Communists in his organization; and the Labour Party, by its own action, in turning down the Communist Party, had plainly indicated that there was, at last, a fighting group in Britain which had attracted good mass fighters to its ranks.

Of course, continued Lenin, we must not forget that the Communist Party in its application for affiliation to the Labour Party very frankly put forward certain conditions which would have given it full freedom of action to conduct its own policy

in its own way. We must never enter into negotiations with bodies, such as the Labour Party, without demanding full freedom of action. ...

Lenin passed on to review the political situation in Britain.

The next General Election would be of paramount importance, and the Communists ought to play a most important part in it. As Lenin favored the policy of supporting the Labour Party, in order to assist it to capture political power, this subject was thrashed out in detail. Lenin advises the Communists to help the Labour Party to get a majority at the next election in order to facilitate the general decadence of the Parliamentary system.

Already, he reasoned, there are thousands of people in Britain who feel that the Parliamentary system of social representation cannot solve the problems which history has placed before it. These people had become discontented and disillusioned regarding the Parliamentary system of social control as a result of the inability of that machine to cope with the vital tasks of modern society.

In other words, the passage of events was providing a series of concrete experiences which were educating the masses regarding the general breakdown of capitalism, in the sphere of social representation. The toiling masses, who had neither the time nor the inclination to examine social theories, always learnt their political lessons by undergoing concrete experiences.

The task of the revolutionary Communist is not only to preach his Marxist theories; he must prove that his theories are correct by compelling his opponents to act in such a way that they provide the practical lessons which enables the Communist to test his theories before the eyes of the masses.

The test of Marxist and Communist theory is experience. How then can the Communists of England prove to the workers that the Parliamentary machine has

broken down and can no longer serve them or the interests of their class?

Since the days of the Armistice, the Parliamentary system in England has been on trial. During the past two years the political policy of Lloyd George had shown many workers how little they could expect from any Parliamentary form of Government manned by the capitalist class. Since the Armistice, Lloyd George, Churchill, Bonar Law, and Co., have had an opportunity to demonstrate what they could do, and their reign of office has been one trail of disasters so far as the workers are concerned.

The Labour Party solemnly assures the masses that they could solve the problems confronting society if once they were in control of the Governmental machine. So far as Henderson, Thomas, and the Labour Party are concerned, they only differ from Lloyd George in that they have never had an opportunity to control the Government. Knowing, as we do, that Henderson, MacDonald, and their followers cannot solve the immediate problems confronting the masses through the Parliamentary machine, we ought to prove the correctness of our theory by giving the Labour Party a chance to prove that we are correct.

The return of the Labour Party to power will accelerate the inevitable collapse of the Parliamentary system, and this will provide the concrete experiences which will ultimately drive the masses towards Communism and the Soviet solution to the modern problems. For these reasons the Communists in Britain ought to support the Labour Party at the next election in order to help it to bring on, ever faster, the crisis which will ultimately overwhelm it.

At this point, I interposed, and said that if the Communist Party officially assisted the Labour Party to capture political power in order to precipitate a crisis, it was just possible that the indignant masses, remembering that we had urged them to vote for the Labour Party, might sweep us away too, when the social crash took place.

Lenin pondered over this for a moment and said that the Communist Party, in

assisting the Labour Party to capture the Government, must make its own case very clear to the masses. He then advanced the following argument which he pressed forward very strongly, and which he wishes the Communist Party to discuss. He said the Communist Party could easily help the Labour Party to power and at the same time keep its own weapon clean.

At the forthcoming elections, the Communist Party ought to contest as many seats as possible, but, where it could not put up a candidate, it ought to issue a manifesto in every constituency challenged by the Labour Party urging the workers to vote for the Labour candidate. The manifesto should frankly state that the Communist Party is most emphatically opposed to the Labour Party, but asks it to be supported in order that Henderson, MacDonald, and Co. may demonstrate to the masses their sheer helplessness. Such a manifesto, such a policy, would accelerate and intensify the problem now looming up before capitalism and its Parliamentary system. But, above all, such a policy would provide the concrete experiences which would teach the masses to look to the Soviet method as the historically evolved institution destined to seriously grapple with the manifold problems now pressing so heavily upon humanity.

We discussed this problem for some time and viewed it from many angles. I kept raising many points against Lenin's position until at last he, no doubt scenting a good dialectical duel, challenged me to debate the whole matter in the columns of "The Communist." I readily assented to this, and asked him when he would have his first contribution ready. He looked around sadly at the mountains of work—work involving the solution of international problems—piled up in front of him. I at once said I would write up his case for the Press, as I have done above. To this suggestion he heartily agreed.

I know, said Lenin, that it may seem awful to young and inexperienced Communists to have any relations with the Labour Party, whose policy of opportunism is more

dangerous to the masses than that of consistent and openly avowed enemies like Winston Churchill. But if the Communist Party intends to secure and wield power it will be compelled to come into contact with groups and organizations which are bitterly opposed to it. And it will have to learn how to negotiate and deal with them.

Here in Russia, we have been forced by circumstances to discuss and make arrangements with elements which would hang us if they got the chance. Have we not even entered into alliances and compacts with Governments whose very hands reeked with the blood of our murdered Communist comrades?

Why have we entered into such contracts and adopted such a policy? It is because we are realists and not utopians. It is because, at present, international capitalism is more powerful than we are. Every move, each Treaty, and all our negotiations with capitalist States, are but one side of the Russian Soviet Government's policy to conserve its strength in order to consolidate its power. Learn to meet your enemies and be not afraid. It tests your strength, it creates experiences, it judges the character of your members. And you may find that your most embittered critics are not in the camp of the enemy but are the shallow doctrinaires to whom revolutionary Socialism is a mere manual of phrases instead of a guide to action.

While we were talking, Lenin was continually interrupted by the arrival of cables, despatches and messages. He was frequently called to the phone. Despite these things, he could return quite serenely to the point under discussion.

I confess that I was slightly agitated when entering the Kremlin; bad news had arrived from the various fronts; Poland was acting strangely at the Riga Conference; France had been indulging in one of her bullying outbursts; and Finland was on the point of signing peace. All these things, I imagined, would make it impossible for Lenin to settle down and have a quiet talk on the various details of the movement upon which I was anxious to have his opinion.

When I entered the room he was courteous, cool and tranquil. He eagerly entered into a discussion of many points on Communist tactics, which, to some people, might have seemed almost trivial. Lenin is always anxious to hear of any new development in Marxism, and to him every aspect of the movement is important. I very timidly suggested the possible application of Marxist theory to a certain subject which had been monopolized by the anthropologists and ethnologists. He became enthusiastic over the problem which he quickly elaborated and extended, made several important suggestions, indicated where some good data could be found, and urged that the matter should be written and published. To Lenin, Communism is a synthetic philosophy.

After having had a talk with Lenin, it is easy to understand why his quiet and humorous style fails to impress middle-class intellectuals. People like Bertrand Russell are in the habit of meeting pompous bourgeois thinkers whose ideas on social theories are so incoherent and vague that they can only express themselves with great difficulty. This ponderous and floundering method of struggling to deliver an idea is, in certain quarters, mistaken for mental ability. Lenin, on the other hand, sees problems so clearly and is able to explain himself with such clarity and simplicity, that his conclusions seem to be the obvious deductions at which anyone would inevitably arrive.

Source: [Marxist Internet Archive](https://www.marxistinternetarchive.org/)

