The Leninist Party and Democratic Centralism

Dave Stockton Fri, 30/01/1998 - 11:59
Dave Stockton

"The party is not an arena for the assertion of free individuality, but an instrument of the proletarian revolution?.

Trotsky?s words from 1939 form the background against which Lenin himself approached the question of democracy in the revolutionary party.

As Dave Stockton explains, Lenin?s views on the balance between centralism and democracy in the party were forged concretely in the struggle for a revolutionary programme in the fight against Russian Tsarism.

In the aftermath of the collapse of Stalinism it has become fashionable on the ?far left? to question the principles of democratic centralism. The most radical critics suggest that the working class does not need a centralised party but rather a decentralised, amorphous movement, similar to the ?movements of the oppressed?. Others suggest that even if a democratic centralist party is desirable in the long term it is impossible to build one now. What is needed today, they say, is to regroup the large number of left groups into a mutually tolerant forum for discussion and common action.

Social Democrats and libertarians have been joined by repentant Stalinists in blaming many of the problems of the degeneration of the Russian Revolution on the supposed democratic deficiencies of the Bolshevik Party itself. They claim that the roots of Soviet totalitarianism were to be found in the Leninist party and in its organisational principle?democratic centralism.

Even when the democratic centralism of the Bolsheviks is not dishonestly conflated with Stalinist bureaucratic centralism, it is often seen as playing some sort of contributory role?lacking the checks and balances, the federal and decentralising elements which could prevent bureaucratisation. In this view Leninism is in need of being supplemented with the left reformist or the libertarian traditions, often disguised as feminism.

In their view the ?centre? of such a formation must by definition be ignorant and out of touch with the lived experience of struggle and practice. This is found only in the local, the base unit, the periphery. Orders ?from above? will inevitably cripple democratic self-expression. They must, the argument goes, inhibit spontaneity and self-confidence; a centre by its nature will tend to dominate and repress.

This article attempts to answer the question, was Lenin?s Bolshevism responsible in some measure at least for the bureaucratisation of the Russian Revolution and the first workers? state? Of course, part of the answer to this lies in an analysis of why that state degenerated. But a vital part also lies in examining what democratic centralism was in Bolshevik practice, how it evolved during the history of Russian Social Democracy and Bolshevism.

This is no abstract historical question. The Bolsheviks are, so far, the only party to successfully lead a mass workers? revolution and to place power in the hands of direct organs of workers? democracy?soviets.

An examination of the key stages in the development of the Leninist party and democratic centralism is vital because examples of Bolshevik practice and quotes from Lenin are often treated as a decisive argument when taken out of context. This is done both by over-zealous defenders of democratic centralism and by its critics.

The former give it a bureaucratic and sectarian interpretation, the latter an opportunist, spontaneist and libertarian spin. Their unity is that they both believe there is a fixed formula for democratic centralism which fits equally the small
propaganda group fighting for its ideas in a situation of profound ideological confusion and a mass party attempting to lead the workers' organisations in a revolutionary situation.

The clearest and most succinct statement of the method that must be used to understand what democratic centralism means is Trotsky's short article On Democratic Centralism: A Few Words about the Party Regime:

?A party is an active organism. It develops in the struggle with outside obstacles and inner contradictions . . . The regime of a party does not fall ready made from the sky but is formed gradually in struggle. A political line predominates over the regime. First of all it is necessary to define strategic problems and tactical methods correctly in order to solve them. The organisational forms should correspond to the strategy and the tactic. Only a correct policy can guarantee a healthy regime.?

Later he says:

?Democracy and centralism do not at all find themselves in an invariable ratio to one another. Everything depends on the concrete circumstances, on the political situation in the country, on the strength of the party and its experience, on the general level of its members and the authority which the leadership has succeeded in winning before a conference. When the problem is one of one of formulating a political line for the next period, democracy triumphs over centralism. When the problem is political action, centralism subordinates democracy to itself. Democracy again asserts its rights when the party feels the need to examine critically its own actions. The equilibrium between democracy and centralism establishes itself in the actual struggle, at moments it is violated and then again re-established.?1

Laying the foundations of a revolutionary party in Russia

A party is that section of a class which understands the need to organise together to intervene in political life in order to shape the policy, or indeed the very character of, the state. It must therefore have a goal or series of goals which constitute its programme. It must also have methods of work (tactics) for achieving these goals. It must have principles which guide its conflict or collaboration with other parties.

A working class party must pursue the historic interest of the proletariat, understanding its immediate or local interests and its tactics in terms of what advances the achievement of its strategic goals. No Marxist party can be founded except on the basis of a programme. The entire life struggle of Marx and Engels was devoted to developing such a programme and its organisational expressions. Their work in the First International culminated with its London Congress, in September 1871, declaring that:

? . . . the working class cannot act as a class, except by constituting itself into a political party, distinct from and opposed to all the old parties formed by the propertied classes.?2

Marx and Engels did not elaborate a conception of the form that such party should take, nor any view of the relationship between democracy and discipline within it. This was left to Russian Marxism and above all to Lenin. But the theory and practice of the Leninist party represents a continuity with Marx and Engels? outlook and at the same time a leap forward.

A vital transitional figure between Marx and Engels, and Lenin was George Plekhanov. In 1883 he helped found the Emancipation of Labour Group. This tiny grouping concentrated for over a decade and a half on the application of Marxism to Russia. Producing a string of books, pamphlets and translations of key Marxist texts, it laid the theoretical basis of Russian Marxism and the future Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP).

The working out of the overall perspective, strategy and key tactics of that programme is, necessarily, the task of a small nucleus of political cadres, intellectuals or worker intellectuals. A new programme, a new party, cannot be born and find its way in the world except in struggle against pre-existing parties or movements and their ideas and their programmes. Such an original nucleus must, therefore, develop the maximum homogeneity in order to see its ideas triumph. Polemical conflict is central to this original stage.
Many such nuclei will perish in the attempt. Those whose ideas are in accord with the fundamental trends and tasks facing the working class will triumph?if they are upheld by a determined and creative grouping of fighters. In this early stage of party building the first centralism is programmatic, i.e. all work centres on the eventual creation of a revolutionary strategy. Democracy is the freedom of ideas and debate within such an organisation.

This stage is far from the easy-going, free for all of ideas and theories that the petty bourgeois intelligentsia imagines. It is harsh, full of conflict, intolerant? of error; for systematic error represents the influence of the bourgeoisie. The earliest years of Russian Marxism were dominated by such struggles.

Agitation and the fight against Economism

But it was the young Vladimir Ulyanov, Lenin, who was central to the practical and theoretical working out of how to build a revolutionary workers? party in Russian conditions. He had become a social democrat in 1890. From the autumn of 1893 he was active in Marxist propaganda circles in St Petersburg. This development had required a break with the Narodniks, the Russian populists whose politics were a mixture of revolutionary democracy and utopian socialism and whose tactics concentrated on illegal conspiracy and the use of individual terror.

Lenin took only one lesson from the revolutionary populists of the 1880s: without a serious professional illegal organisation Social Democracy would never gain a foothold in Russia. For Lenin, only with such an organisation would it be possible to build links with the Russian workers. And with such an organisation, rooted in the working class, Tsarism could and would be overturned.

Lenin had an active, combative notion of the revolutionary party?one that could involve itself in and stimulate the day to day struggles of workers and link these struggles to the goal of destroying Tsarism and, beyond that, the socialist revolution.

But by the second half of the 1890s the success of the early Marxists led to conflict within and between the existing propaganda circles, conflicts which involved questions of programme and organisation. Programmatically the argument arose: does the working class need a programme at all? Is it not enough that the spontaneous movement of the workers is towards struggle?

If that is the basis of politics then either a party is not needed at all or it is one whose role is merely to encourage spontaneity or organise links between existing groups. If, however, the task is indeed to link the immediate struggle of the workers to the struggle for power then an organisational form has to be developed that infuses the day to day struggle with the revolutionary goal. Such a party will, to the degree that this is possible, be internally democratic and democratic in its relations with other mass workers? organisations but it will have to be centralised and disciplined in its pursuit of its goals.

The debate focused on a new method of social democratic work that had recently been developed among Jewish (Yiddish speaking) workers around Vilna in Lithuania. There Arkadi Kremer had, together with another young intellectual Yuli Martov, written a short pamphlet, On Agitation.

This advocated a decisive break with the old method of Marxist study circles in favour of the production and distribution of leaflets at the factories which took up the workers? immediate grievances. This would attract the most combative proletarians towards the social democratic circles rather than those who merely wanted to receive an education. The adoption of this method of work was a major step forward and the young Lenin welcomed and adopted it.

The ?agitators? believed it was the task of Marxists not simply to educate individual workers in Marxism and wait for the revolution but to actually hasten that day by helping to build a mass movement of the working class. It went beyond the illegal distribution of literature to the promotion of direct action by the workers in the factories. That this was the business of a social democratic organisation (as opposed to a trade union) was a new idea.
The new agitational method spread to St Petersburg. Martov brought copies of On Agitation to the capital. There he met Lenin for the first time and both agreed on the new type of work. In the autumn of 1895 they founded the St Petersburg League of Struggle for the Emancipation of the Working Class.

This turn necessarily raised organisational problems. It involved activities which would be much easier for the Okhrana’s network of spies to uncover. The question was how to organise secretly to intervene publicly. The propaganda circle alone could not provide the answer. Indeed the League of Struggle was on the eve of bringing out the first issue of their paper when the entire leadership was arrested. Lenin was later to blame this on their own lack of professionalism in conspiratorial work.

Nevertheless, the growth of mass struggles showed that the new method could work. In 1896/97 a strike wave of textile and other workers swept St Petersburg, Moscow and other factory towns over wages and the length of the working day. The Social Democrats found a warm welcome in the factories

This led to some of the ?agitators?, like Arkadi Kremer, drawing false one-sided conclusions, leading away from a revolutionary strategy altogether. Enthusiastic over the workers? strikes over wages, the length of the working day and factory conditions they came to the conclusion that only such immediate economic demands of the workers could be the basis of agitation. For a whole stage at least, the political struggle against Tsarism should be left to the bourgeois liberals and the Narodnik intellectuals. The workers should concentrate on making ?palpable gains?. Plekhanov and then Lenin named this trend ?Economism?.

In the summer of 1900, after discussions in St Petersburg with Martov, Lenin left Russia with the project of reaching agreement with Plekhanov and Axelrod to produce an anti-Economist paper which would lay the programmatic and organisational foundations for a real revolutionary social democratic party in Russia. That paper was Iskra.

**Lenin, Iskra and What is to be done?**

Iskra set out both to establish a programme and tactical principles and to win the underground committees and circles across the Russian Empire to its project. The aim was to make a leap to a centralised, necessarily illegal, party. The Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) had been founded in 1898 but the police had arrested most of its leadership and by 1900 it was in fragments.

Iskra was, in effect, an open faction within the RSDLP and was publicly homogeneous?as factions must be because they are fighting to act as the basis for the leadership of the party. Lenin commented that people could scarcely tell who had written which articles in Iskra, so closely and homogeneously did the editorial board work.

From late December 1900 to July 1903, 44 issues of Iskra campaigned for a unified, centralised party for the whole Russian Empire based on a common programme, with a central party organ, produced abroad, which would give political direction to the whole party.

The paper served both an ideological and an organising purpose. It launched a savage battle against all programmatic confusion, heterogeneity and opportunism. In the fourth issue of Iskra Lenin wrote an article entitled Where to begin?,3 that defines and attacks the Economism of the emigré paper Rabochaya Mysl (Worker’s Thought) as ?endeavouring to clip and narrow the work of political organisation and agitation.?

But he goes on to attack even more savagely the semi-Economist organ Rabocheye Dyelo (Workers’ Cause) for practicing ?unprincipled eclecticism in organisational and tactical questions?, pointing out that it is ?incapable of distinguishing immediate demands from the main tasks and permanent needs of the movement.?4

Lenin was not afraid to argue openly for a political organisation which was structured outwards from a centre, or ?from above?, one able to mobilise and direct every local committee and if need be individual party cadre. The summary of the whole approach of Iskra is the famous pamphlet What is to be Done? which appeared in 1902.

Here Lenin attacked the core of the Economist’s method, the idea of tailing the spontaneous consciousness of the
working class. Lenin argued that socialist consciousness is not spontaneously and gradually generated by the workers on their own. Here we emphasise that Lenin is not talking about general class instinct, awareness of the common interests of workers as workers, but of socialist consciousness. He insists that this has to be brought into the working class ?from outside??outside, that is, of the everyday, piecemeal economic struggle.

Lenin accepts that the working class is drawn, by its very conditions of social existence, into struggle against capital and that such struggles clash with the state and raise political questions.

His view was that ?the spontaneous element, in essence represents nothing more or less than consciousness in an embryonic form?, that it represented the ?class struggle in embryo, but only in embryo?, i.e. not yet social democratic consciousness. It is no insult or deprecation of such workers and their struggle that they ?were not and could not be, conscious of the irreconcilable antagonism of their interests to the whole of the modern political and social system.?

Lenin?s starting point in defending an organisation of ?professional revolutionaries? is the conditions of deep illegality which existed in Russia. Attempts to organise throughout the preceding decade had repeatedly failed, condemning activists to long jail sentences, exile, or in some cases, death. Many more were demoralised and left active politics. Only people who devoted their whole lives to this work could achieve the desired result of a party that could survive and prosper, even under conditions of illegality and repression.

Lenin never imagined for one minute that this apparatus was a separate, sufficient unto itself ?representative of the working class?. Its task was precisely to relate to the spontaneous eruption of struggles, to the temporary organisations of struggle which would be thrown up, to the growth of semi-secret or public bodies that already did or would in the future make up the labour movement. Lenin never confused this secret, underground party organisation with the labour movement. A key part of its task was to serve that movement, protect it as much as possible from disruption by the police:

?Centralisation of the most secret functions in an organisation of revolutionaries will not diminish, but rather increase the extent and enhance the quality of the activity of a large number of other organisations that are intended for a broad public and are therefore as loose, as non-secret as possible, such as workers? trade unions, workers? self-education circles and circles for reading illegal literature: and socialist as well as democratic circles, circles amongst all sections of the population, etc., etc.?5

The ?professional revolutionary? became an almost instant target of attack from professional opportunists and careerists. It was, they claimed, a bureaucratic concept which would exclude the masses from control of their own organisations.

Despite the fact that What is to be Done? is written for Russian conditions before the 1905 revolution, it remains a key work, indeed the foundation stone of the Leninist party. Even those features that relate most closely to its ?illegal context? are far from irrelevant in an epoch where legality for the revolutionary party up to the seizure of power is highly unlikely and where only small and highly privileged parts of the globe have enjoyed unbroken decades of democratic liberties. The ability to organise secretly remains central in many countries and for all international organisations which have cadres in countries with few legal rights.

The concept of the professional revolutionary is a broader one than that of fighting under illegal conditions. It is, as we shall see, broadened and supplemented by Lenin?s development of the theory of the party fighting in more legal or fully legal conditions which allow for full internal democracy at all levels of the party.

The Second Congress and the 1903 split
The second congress of the RSDLP assembled in Brussels on 30 July 1903. The congress was the only fully democratic element possible in an underground party?sf life and it was clear that the Iskra faction had a large majority of the 70 delegates? votes. Ranged against Iskra at the Congress were the Economist ?public factions? around the newspapers Rabocheye Dyelo and Rabochaya Mysl, the powerful Jewish workers? organisation, the Bund, as well as the Social
Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania (SDKPiL).

Iskra proposed a unitary party but with three, not one, central bodies: a Central Committee based in Russia, an editorial board of a central organ located abroad and a party Council made up of representatives of the two former bodies.

Clearly this was a compromise arrangement, polycentric rather than with a single centre. But this was necessary in existing conditions of deep illegality. Centralised direction of the local units of the party had to be carried out from within Russia. But the freedom and outspokenness of an illegal party organ could only be achieved abroad. The two bodies however needed to be co-ordinated?hence the party Council. Iskra also proposed the dissolution of all the émigré papers and organisations except those recognised by the congress.

However, totally unexpectedly to both sides, the Iskra faction itself disintegrated during the course of the Congress. An apparently minor question of a formulation on the definition of membership in the party rules was later deepened by a much more bitter conflict over the composition of the editorial board and the Central Committee.

Martov, with the aid of the votes of the Bund and Rabocheye Dyelo, won on the party rules. He succeeded in gaining a majority for the definition of party membership as a ?personal association under the direction of one of the party?s organisations?, as opposed to Lenin?s formulations of ?personal participation in one of the party?s organisations?.

Lenin and Plekhanov fought hard against Martov?s formulation as too broad and loose. Lenin did not, as some writers still try to claim, insist that to be a member of the party you had to be a full-time revolutionary, let alone that such ?professional revolutionaries? were to be exclusively members of the intelligentsia and not workers. Lenin and Plekhanov argued that in present Russian conditions a member had to run the risks and dangers of the party?s illegal work: producing, transporting and distributing its papers and leaflets, agitating in the factories and the universities. Without this a member had no right to share in making its decisions.

Obviously when legal rights and a constitution were won in Russia the narrowness of the illegal party would give way to a broad mass party?though still one that insisted on active participation in its work. When he lost the vote on the membership definition Lenin did not believe that some sort of split had to be organised. He did believe that the struggle showed that Martov and his supporters had given in to opportunism on the question of organisation.

After this, the battle over the rest of the rules was joined with the Bund which demanded to be recognised, in the words of its main spokesperson Lieber, as ?the sole representative of the Jewish proletariat in the party?. The Bund wanted a completely free hand in organising and representing Jewish workers throughout the Tsar?s empire. Iskra objected to this, insisting that the Bund should indeed be the organisation of the RSDLP working among Yiddish speaking workers but it should not be a quasi-national organisation of all individual Jewish workers.

The entire Iskra faction was united in rejecting this federalist conception of the party. Martov and Trotsky both spoke vigorously in the debate. When the vote was taken the Bund and the Rabocheye Dyelo faction walked out.

Their departure now gave Lenin and Plekhanov a majority (?bolshevik? in Russian). They could count on 24 hard Iskra- ists to 20 Martov supporters (called ?mensheviks? or minority). Lenin was determined, for both political and practical reasons, to reduce the editorial board of Iskra and the Central Committee to three-person bodies. The practical reasons were straightforward. Axelrod, Potresov and Zasulich despite being on the old editorial board, had played virtually no active role, writing few articles and never taking part in the editing.

Martov was determined to have a majority on the editorial board. Lenin and Plekhanov, having only been defeated on the party membership definition by the votes of the departed Bundists and Economists, were equally determined to ensure a firm line . They fought for a majority on the Iskra board and on the Central Committee. Martov, Axelrod, Potresov and Zasulich vehemently opposed this with a proposal to retain the old editorial board of six with, in addition, the power of a vote of two thirds to co-opt new full members.

In fact, this would give the congress minority a two thirds majority on the board and the power even to increase this by
co-opting others, probably Trotsky, who supported them but who Plekhanov heartily detested. The Lenin-Plekhanov majority duly elected their three person slate (themselves and Martov) to the Iskra editorial board.

The protest which the Mensheviks made about Lenin the dictator, the Bonaparte, Robespierre etc., was utterly in bad faith and covered up the minority?s own shamefully undemocratic actions at the end of and after the congress. When they were defeated they refused to play any further part in the proceedings. Martov refused to serve on the editorial board of Iskra unless three of his supporters were co-opted. He also refused to serve on the Central Committee. Lenin and Plekhanov?s supporters thus secured all three places on the Central Committee. Thereafter, the ?mensheviks? boycotted all the leading and executive bodies chosen by the congress. It was, as Lenin said, ?the general strike of the generals?.

This behaviour showed the petty bourgeois intellectual character of the Mensheviks, their determination to hang on to the circle spirit of the days of pre-party organisation when personal commitment, personal trust and personal relationships had?understandably enough?played a central role. But it was necessary to move on to the stage of a real party with a programme, sovereign congresses, elected leading bodies, a regular illegal propaganda paper, and a network of underground committees. In these circumstances the old personalism was out of place. It could lead only to amateurishness and ineffectiveness and an indulgence towards opportunism?such as Martov had shown at the second congress.

The actual split in the party was carried through by the Mensheviks not by the Bolsheviks. The Mensheviks wanted a majority on the editorial board of Iskra despite the decisions of the congress which had brought together the assembled representatives of the party in Russia itself as well as abroad. This was thoroughly undemocratic and Lenin rightly resisted it. For a month or two Plekhanov supported him and then caved in to Martov calling on the party council in the autumn of 1903 to co-opt the prima donnas.

This was a clear violation of the decisions of the second congress and Lenin therefore refused to serve on Iskra any longer in these circumstances. He set about organising a public faction instead, rallying to his side the underground organisations in Russia where he could count upon a majority.

Menshevism, by abandoning the old Iskra?s work became the rallying point for all the former Economists, for the social democrats who advocated federalism or adapted to various forms of nationalism. Their general evolution was rightwards. Lenin never doubted from this time onwards, whatever his views on a united or two distinct parties, that the Mensheviks represented an opportunist trend which had to be fought and defeated not compromised with or conciliated. Here he was to differ with two figures who, in terms of fidelity to the goal of working class power and revolutionary tactics, he stood closest to?Leon Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg.

Their approach represented an active spontaneism or objectivism and demonstrated their failure, at the time, to understand the relationship between the concept of the democratic centralist party and the fulfilment of the revolutionary strategy. They believed that the militant forward thrust of the proletariat in revolutionary situations would suppress opportunist (and sectarian) deviations by the revolutionaries. Since they in no way shared Martov and Axelrod?s increasing tendency to leave the democratic revolution to the bourgeoisie, it made a split between them and Menshevism inevitable as the revolutionary crisis approached. But they did mistake Lenin?s development of an active role for the party for sectarianism and bureaucratism. They misunderstood his specific and temporary insistence that democratism (not democracy in general) in illegal conditions was ?a dangerous plaything?, for dictatorial, undemocratic principles.

In July 1904 the Mensheviks managed to involve Rosa Luxembourg in the dispute. She wrote an extensive article which was carried in both Iskra and in the theoretical journal of the German Social Democracy Neue Zeit. In Organisational Questions of Russian Social Democracy she attacked Lenin?s much disputed dictum that the Social Democrat is ?the Jacobin indissolubly linked to the organisation of the class conscious Proletariat?. She characterises Lenin?s position as a collapse into Blanquism. She insisted:
Social Democracy is not linked to the organisation of the working class, it is the working class's own movement. Social democratic centralism must therefore have an essentially different character from Blanquist centralism. It can be none other than the authoritative expression of the will of the conscious and militant vanguard of the workers, vis-à-vis the separate groups and individuals among them: it is as it were, a self-centralism of the leading stratum of the proletariat, the rule of the majority within the confines of its own party organisation.

Luxemburg was wrong and the fact that opportunism in matters of organisation could lead on to opportunism in matters of tactics and then in matters of programme became clearer during 1904 and 1905. The new Iskra took a line on the campaigns and activities of the liberals which sharpened the differences. Iskra argued a position of avoiding at all costs frightening the liberal campaigners then rallying around the protest banquets organised around the Zemstvo local government organs in autumn 1904.

In sharp contrast, the Bolsheviks issued a clear warning of the cowardice and reactionary nature of the liberal bourgeoisie and sought to ensure the maximum political independence of the working class from the bourgeois banqueters. Within a year of the split, as Lenin said, 'tactical differences became the most important'.

By the spring of 1905 the two public factions were organised separately, each with its own organs: the Menshevik Iskra and the Bolshevik Vperyod (Forward). At this time they both held congresses claiming to be the RSDLP. For the Mensheviks, the proletariat's role was to encourage the bourgeoisie to make its own revolution. This was clearly a tacit abandonment of the old Emancipation of Labour Group and Iskra perspective of the hegemonic role of the proletariat in the bourgeois revolution. The polemics of the Bolshevik paper Vperyod in the early months of 1905 were openly directed against this. In a letter to Alexander Bogdanov and Sergei Gusev, the two main Bolshevik leaders in Russia, Lenin wrote:

'We bring the split into the open, we call the Vperyodists to a Congress, we want to organise a Vperyodist party. . . ?'

Lenin's attempt to relaunch the Bolsheviks as the RSDLP was completely justified. If the Russian workers were to have an active leading party during the approaching revolution, one that did not hold back the independent action of the working class in favour of the reform movement, then complete freedom of action and criticism were essential.

The revolution of 1905?from sharper divisions to reunification

On 22 January 1905 the fusillades fired by the guards regiments into tens of thousands of peaceful demonstrators unleashed the revolution. This revolution was, in the short run, to confound the organisational plans of both the Bolsheviks and Menshevik factions and set them both on the path to re-unification. Why? Because the Mensheviks' perspective was falsified and the Bolshevik one confirmed.

Quite simply the Mensheviks' illusions in liberal leadership of the revolution were quickly dashed while the Bolsheviks' belief in the revolutionary character and potential of the workers and peasants was vindicated. By the summer of 1905. Menshevism was still a form of centrism?petty bourgeois opportunists or vacillators in Lenin's contemporary terminology. It could and did swing left under the pressure of revolutionary events.

Some of the Menshevik leaders, such as Dan and Martynov, came close to adopting Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution. By October the Mensheviks were supporting calls for insurrection. The de facto, revolutionary legality brought a 'spontaneously?revolutionary proletariat onto the stage via the Soviets, which the Mensheviks played an important part in initiating. Bolshevism, in the form of the professional revolutionary ?committee men? on the other hand, momentarily evinced a one-sided, potentially sectarian hostility to Soviets. Lenin had to launch a political fight to correct Bolshevism.

During the summer and autumn of 1905 Lenin changed his position on the desirability of re-unification with the Mensheviks. As a result of the effects of the revolutionary proletariat on the factions and because of the need for the largest possible vanguard party to lead a nation-wide insurrection, Lenin became convinced that unity and full democratic centralism were necessary and possible.
This did not indicate any softening of his line on the Mensheviks’ opportunist positions. A united party with the Mensheviks was neither an absolute good nor an absolute evil. It was a means to the end of winning the working class to the revolutionary line of the party. If it had meant for one minute the subordination of the revolutionary forces to the strategy of accepting the hegemony of the liberals in the democratic revolution he would never have supported it.

In October there was a national railway strike and soviets were set up in Moscow and St Petersburg. On 17 October, as a result of a general strike organised by the soviet, Nicholas II was forced to issue a manifesto promising a popularly elected Duma and a broad series of democratic liberties, freedom of the press and parties.

As a result of the failure of their perspective the Mensheviks were in a state of advanced political disarray. By the autumn of 1905 the main Menshevik paper, Nachalo, was being edited by Trotsky and Parvus, the theorists of Permanent Revolution.

Lenin saw that unity was now possible, based on the revolutionary actions of the class. In a period of mass struggle, pressure on the Mensheviks would present them with a clear choice between revolutionary and opportunist politics?providing, of course, the Bolsheviks did not disarm but strove to take the lead in the united party:

?The tactics adopted in the period of ?whirlwind? did not further estrange the two wings of the social democratic party, but brought them closer together. Former disagreements gave way to a unity of opinion on the question of armed uprising.?9

In addition an unprecedented period of legality was opening up and in such conditions it was possible to build a mass Social Democratic Party, with both right and left wings, but with the revolutionaries in the ascendant. The party would have to be open to mass of revolutionary social democratic workers, ?spontaneously? roused to political life by the revolution and by experiencing first hand the work of the revolutionaries within it. To do this the democratic principle would have to be applied to all levels of the party.

As early as September 1905, Lenin began to raise the question of extending the democratic principle of elections within the party. If the party was to draw in the young militant workers coming into struggle it would have to combine democratic structures with continued central leadership. Lenin had to address the sectarian doubts and fears of the Bolshevik cadres trained in the underground struggle against the Mensheviks:

?Danger may be said to lie in a sudden influx of large numbers of non-Social Democrats into the party. If that occurred the party would be dissolved among the masses, it would cease to be the conscious vanguard of its class, its role would be reduced to that of a tail. And this danger could undoubtedly become a very serious one if we showed any inclination towards demagogy, if we lacked party principles (programme, tactical rules, organisational experience) entirely, or if these principles were feeble and shaky, but the fact is that no such ?ifs? exist. We Bolsheviks have never shown any inclination towards demagogy. On the contrary, we have always fought resolutely, openly and straightforwardly against the slightest attempts at demagogy: we have demanded class consciousness from those joining the party, we have insisted in the tremendous importance of continuity in the party?s development, we have preached discipline and demanded that every party member be trained in one or other of the Party organisations.?10

One expression of the Menshevik swing to the left in 1905 was that, after over a year of defying the legitimate leadership and organisational structures agreed by the second congress, they were now willing to consider unity. Indeed it was the Mensheviks, in particular Axelrod, who coined the term ?democratic centralism?. At an All-Russian Menshevik conference held on 20 November 1905 they passed a resolution which said;

?The RSDLP must be organised according to the principle of democratic centralism. All party members take part in the election of party institutions.?11

Only three weeks later a Bolshevik conference passed a similar resolution?On Party Reorganisation?which said:

?Recognising as indisputable the principle of democratic centralism, the conference considers the broad
implementation of the elective principle necessary, and, while granting elected centres full powers in matters of ideological and practical leadership, they are at the same time subject to recall, their actions are given broad publicity, and they are to be strictly accountable for these activities.\(^\text{12}\)

Events in Russia were moving to a climax and involving the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks in common revolutionary action. In St Petersburg, the Soviet was under the leadership of Trotsky, who had broken his links to the Mensheviks and regarded himself as a "non-factional Social Democrat". Aiding him was Parvus, hitherto a left-wing member of the German SPD and co-author with Trotsky of the theory of Permanent Revolution.

In mid-November another general strike in St Petersburg had to be called off, failing to win the eight hour day. On 3 December the government, seeing the weakening of the numbers of strikers who responded to the Soviet's calls for action, decided to arrest the entire Soviet, charging them with preparing an armed insurrection.

The news of the arrest of the St Petersburg Soviet impelled the Moscow Soviet to launch a general strike that lasted from 7 to 11 December. It then transformed this into an armed insurrection which seized control of and barricaded the workers' district of Presnaya and captured the city's main railway stations. Troops sent from St Petersburg eventually put down the rising.

Without the revolutionaries realising it this was the high point of the revolution, though it was to be a further eighteen months before the Tsar was able to reassert anything like the autocracy he wielded before October 1905. The years 1905-07 were the years of the birth and flourishing of full democratic centralism. Based on the influx of revolutionary workers into the party it involved the principle of election and recall for all leadership bodies in the party, from the local committees to the central committee. It was based on annual sovereign congresses. It allowed for the maintenance of groupings within the party; what Lenin called 'trends' but which could harden and sharpen once more into factions. The basis of this democratic centralism remained discipline in action.

This very democratic structure was made possible, and was necessitated by, the revolutionary situation, the broad de facto legality, the existence of legal daily papers, mass public meetings and debates in the factories and other workplaces. Some commentators such as Marcel Liebman have idealised this situation as a for all time norm.\(^\text{13}\) Others, such the Spartacists, have insisted that Lenin was effectively doing an entry tactic in a non-Bolshevik, non-Leninist mass party and that therefore the democratic centralism of this period was not real Leninism at all.\(^\text{14}\)

Both are wrong. If Lenin's views on the scope of party democracy, the permitted level of public disagreement had altered, and were to alter again, this is due not to a regression into sectarianism or bureaucracy in 1908-1914 (Liebman) nor to an ascent to full Bolshevism in 1912-14 (the Spartacists). The most casual observer will spot the fact that the practice of the Bolshevik Party in 1917, with its vigorous internal polemics which repeatedly spilled into the party press, the frequent conferences, the changes in the strategy and tactics, all indicate a party very close to that envisaged by Lenin in his writings on democratic centralism in 1905-06.

If these were contradictory positions then it was because the operation of democratic centralism depends on the struggle with outside obstacles and inner contradictions, as Trotsky said. Certainly, the model of 1906 cannot be taken as good for all time. It did not fall ready made from the sky but was itself the product of struggle and would continue to evolve through struggle.

**1906-1908: a united party with two factions**

In April-May 1906 the RSDLP was reunified, the Mensheviks having a majority of the mandates. Nevertheless when it came to the debate on the reunified party's statutes Lenin's disputed 1903 formulation on membership was adopted without opposition!

1. A member of the party is one who accepts the party programme, supports the party financially, and belongs to some party organisation;

2. All party organisations are built on the principles of democratic centralism.\(^\text{15}\)
The statutes summed up the new principles of democratic centralism and they remained those of Bolshevism up to and after the Russian Revolution. In an Appeal to the Party by Delegates to the Unity Congress the ?former Bolsheviks? commented especially on the rights of minorities:

?We were all agreed on the principles of democratic centralism, on guarantees for the rights of all minorities and for all loyal opposition, on the autonomy of every party organisation, on recognising that all party functionaries must be elected, accountable to the party and subject to recall. We see the observance in practice of these principles of organisation, their sincere and consistent application, as a guarantee against splits, a guarantee that the ideological struggle in the Party can and must prove fully consistent with strict organisational unity, with the submission of all to the decisions of the Unity Congress.?16

When, shortly after the Congress, the Central Committee tried to restrict freedom of criticism to the party press and party meetings but forbid it in public meetings Lenin objected strongly:

?The principle of democratic centralism and autonomy for local organisations implies universal and full freedom to criticise so long as this does not disturb the unity of a definite action: it rules out all criticism which disrupts or makes difficult the unity of an action decided on by the party . . . criticism within the limits of the principles of the party programme must be quite free . . . not only at a party meetings but also at public meetings.?17

For Lenin democratic centralism, during this period and in these conditions, included the right to publish differences in party publications, the right of a minority to issue their own publications, the right to speak against the party in public meetings. But it was not permitted to oppose an agreed course of action. For example, once a party decision had been taken to participate in elections, no member should be allowed to call on the public to refrain from voting ?nor should criticism of the decision be tolerated until after it is over?.

The congress affirmed most of the revolutionary programmatic positions of the old party. The Mensheviks, under mass pressure, did not dare to bring forward their opportunist positions on the role of the bourgeoisie. Nevertheless, during and after the congress Lenin was absolutely open about the continued existence of Bolshevism as an ideological trend, that is, of what today would be called a tendency, and urged a continued ideological struggle against Menshevik backsliding from the historic programme of the party, especially concerning the hegemonic role of the working class in the coming revolution.

This was important because the Mensheviks, from 1906 onwards increasingly ignored the preparation for revolutionary struggle and insurrection in favour of parliamentary manoeuvring. What is more he openly called on the party members to watch carefully the decisions of the Menshevik-dominated Central Committee and to call it to order if it did opportunist things. In particular, Lenin warned against the Mensheviks? tendency to seek unprincipled blocs with the Cadets (the newly formed liberal party) while ignoring the Trudoviks (a radical peasant party).

His lack of trust in the Mensheviks is also revealed in the fact that he kept in existence the Bolshevik underground organisation, with its own leadership. Despite the fact that the Bolsheviks won a majority at the London Conference in 1907, and hence a majority for themselves and their Polish and Latvian allies on the Central Committee, unfortunately the revolutionary period which opened in January 1905 was definitively ended by the 3 June coup by the Tsar?s prime minister, Stolypin. From then on things went from bad to worse and the RSDLP was thrust back further and further into illegality.

1908-1911: a return to a Bolshevik faction, then a party

The trend towards unity in the RSDLP only lasted as long as the revolutionary period itself. The Mensheviks, under the impact of mounting defeats, began to swing right back to their worst opportunist positions of 1904, returning to Axelrod?s idea of a broad, legal labour organisation. They could not bear the idea of being cast back into the illegal life of underground committees. Yet to maintain legality meant to operate exclusively within the framework of what was permitted by Stolypin?s laws. Axelrod began to talk about a Labour Party similar to the British one founded in 1906. Not only was this non-socialist and non-revolutionary, but in Russia it would have to be, in Lenin?s terms, a ?Stolypin
By December 1908 Lenin and nearly all the other leaders had been forced back into exile in various west European countries. The Mensheviks, desperate to preserve the legal, ?normal? life of the party, started to trim again politically and tone down their slogans. Hating to submit the new legal organisation to the old underground structures?in which the Bolsheviks were much stronger?they again called for Axelrod?s old slogan of a broad democratic workers? congress to ?reconstruct the party?. This would give them an overwhelming majority and bring to bear the ?realistic? (i.e. pessimistic) pressure of the demoralised rearguard of the workers on the party.

The Bolsheviks stuck to the position reached when the party fused in 1906; namely, that an illegal party apparatus and publications must be maintained for as long as Tsarism existed. But they also favoured utilising legal or semi-legal work around the Duma deputies (who had parliamentary immunity), attempting to preserve a legal press, legal trade union work as well as maintaining a network of social democratic cultural and sporting clubs.

The political reason for all this was obvious. Only the illegal publications and agitation could freely and frankly put forward the full revolutionary programme and tactics. Legal or semi-legal agitation required ?Aesopian language?, such as references to ?the uncurtailed views of consistent democrats.? The experienced socialist could interpret this for what it was, but the masses often could not. To leave the party?s work to this sort of agitation would give an enormous advantage to the opportunists.

But the Bolshevik-Menshevik factional polarity was now made even more confusing by splits within Bolshevism and Menshevism. Soon there were four semi-public factions plus the conciliators (a grouping of left Mensheviks and a few former Bolsheviks) headed by Trotsky.

Bolshevism in 1905-1907 had been led by Lenin, Krupskaya, Alexander Bogdanov and Leonid Krasin. Bogdanov drew into the party and its Bolshevik faction figures such as Anatoly Lunacharsky, Maxim Gorky, M N Pokrovsky. Already in June 1907 sharp differences emerged within the Bolshevik faction over whether to participate in or boycott the Third Duma elections. A majority of Bolsheviks led by Bogdanov, Krasin and others favoured a boycott. They refused to accept that the revolution had been defeated and that a counter-revolutionary situation existed, one in which the parliamentary tribune (and Duma deputy immunity) were important defensive weapons, as was participation in the trade unions.

Instead they stuck to the 1905-1906 perspective. What was important for them was preparation for insurrection. Hence their downplaying of work in the unions and their demand for the boycott of the Duma elections or the ?recall ?of the Duma fraction. In mid-1907 the conflict within the Bolshevik faction became sharp. A new layer of Bolshevik leaders came to the fore: Grigory Zinoviev, Lev Kamenev, Alexei Rykov and Mikhail Tomsky. They all sided with Lenin. Bogdanov went public in his sectarian criticisms of the agreed Bolshevik line on the Duma and Lenin expelled Bogdanov and his supporters from the Bolshevik centre.

Bogdanov then demanded a general conference of the Bolshevik faction which was impractical given the difficulty of getting representatives from the Russian underground to go abroad. Instead from 8-17 June 1909 Lenin called a conference of the extended editorial board of Proletary. This dissociated Bolshevism from Bogdanov. When Bogdanov refused to recognise this conference he was finally expelled from the Bolshevik faction. He created a new faction around the relaunched Vperyod. The fight between his group and the Bolsheviks, within the fragmented RSDLP, was then open?revolving around fundamental questions of perspectives and tactics.

Lenin explained his actions in insisting on relative uniformity within Bolshevism in terms of the difference between a faction and a party. In a faction there was no room for public disunity on essential questions of perspective and tactics. Lenin explained that the decision was not hastily taken or without prolonged debate inside the faction:

?We have exhausted all possibilities and all means of convincing the dissenting comrades, we have worked at this for over eighteen months. However, as a faction, i.e. an association of like-minded people in the Party, we cannot work
without unity on fundamental issues. Splitting away from a faction is not the same as splitting away from the Party. Those who have split away from our faction are not all deprived of the opportunity of working in the Party. Either they will be free lancers? i.e., members of no faction, and will have to be drawn in by the general circumstances of the Party work, or they will try to form a new faction - that is their legitimate right, if they want to uphold and develop their particular shade of views and tactics.18

In January 1910 the battle shifted to the Mensheviks once more when the Fifth All-Russian Conference of the RSDLP met in Paris. It condemned the attempts to liquidate the existing organisation of the RSDLP and to replace it with a shapeless association. By now Axelrod and Potresov were openly arguing for the liquidation of the old RSDLP including its illegal underground apparatus. Axelrod demagogically claimed that doing this would enable the proletariat:...

?... to make a revolution the aim of which is to eliminate the regime of the intelligentsia?s tutelage over the labouring masses and... liquidate our old party system and initiate a new party regime in the ranks of Social Democracy?19.

Lenin was increasingly certain that the Menshevik Liquidators would never come back, as a disciplined minority, to the party. The approach of Trotsky of unifying all factions and trends and hoping that the class struggle, the revolution would make them all do (roughly) the right thing, as happened between October and December 1905, was a hopeless piece of objectivism.

The Liquidators had clearly abandoned all commitment to the old programme and principles of the RSDLP. Lenin insisted the Bolshevik faction was the core of those loyal to such a programme and such a party and if others wished to return to them then a clear agreement had to be struck with these trends and factions, not a marsh-like organisation where all said and did what they liked:

?... unity may at the present time be achieved only by the rapprochement which has already begun, between definite factions that are strong and influential in the practical workers movements, and not by moralising, whining for their abolition. Moreover, this rapprochement must take place and develop on the basis of revolutionary social-democratic tactics and an organisational policy aiming at a determined struggle against Liquidationism both of the ?left? and of the ?right? especially against the latter, since ?left? Liquidationism, being already routed, is a lesser danger.20

1912 ? The foundation of the Bolshevik Party

In the autumn of 1911, Lenin stepped up the campaign against the Bolshevik conciliators and began preparations for a party conference, aimed at purging the Liquidators and ignoring the conciliators. Hundreds of striking miners in the Lena gold fields had been brutally shot down by troops. Sympathetic strikes broke out across all the industrial centres of Russia signalling an end to the dark counter-revolutionary years (1908-1911). In January 1912 the Sixth All-Russia Conference of the RSDLP met in Prague. A small assembly of eighteen Bolshevik and two pro-party Mensheviks conferred from 18 to 30 January.

In fact as a congress of underground workers from Russia, it was very critical of the factional polemics of the exiles and Lenin had to take a repeated dressing-down for the failure to produce literature abroad suitable for workers. Against his inclinations the conference decided to launch a thrice weekly and then a daily paper inside Russia. Clearly this was no conference of yes-men and women. But on one thing they were all agreed: the Liquidators were outside the RSDLP.

The Prague conference was denounced by all the other factions and trends of the old party: the conciliators, the Liquidators and the Vperyodists. The conference, therefore, had to justify its usurpation of the party. It did so in terms of the extremely urgent practical tasks of the working class movement, the vital need to re-establish a competent, practical party centre, closely linked with the local organisations and the fruitless two year campaign to convene a congress.

The conciliators, led by Trotsky, organised the famous August Bloc conference in Vienna in 1912?a motley collection of Liquidators and conciliators brought together only by their hostility to Bolshevism. Most conciliators were
politically closer to Lenin, yet refused absolutely to fight Liquidationism to the finish. Thus, Lenin characterised them, Trotsky in particular, as "phrase-mongers? and "windbags?. Their bloc against the Prague conference was politically unprincipled, hence the particular venom of Lenin?s denunciation of them. As a tendency, Lenin characterised them as what he would later dub, "centrists?:

?When there is a split and in general when there is a bitter struggle between trends, it is inevitable that groups should appear which base their existence on a continuous darting from one side to the other and on petty intrigue.?21

Lenin characterised these centrists attitude thus:

?I condemn Liquidationism?but I don?t say plainly who are the overt and consistent Liquidators. I admit that Liquidationism endangers the very existence of the party - but I don?t say plainly whether or not such and such a group ought to be in the party!?22

The urgency of breaking with Liquidationism (and with conciliationism in 1912) flowed from the upsurge of the working class movement and the need to rebuild the illegal organisation in preparation for the struggles ahead. Soon it was plain that a new revolutionary upswing was beginning. Workers began to flood into the party organisations and fronts in significant numbers. A Bolshevik-dominated daily newspaper?Pravda?was launched in St Petersburg. During the Fourth Duma elections five Bolsheviks deputies and seven Mensheviks were elected.

In the semi-legal conditions which existed during these two years the party returned to a considerable degree of the democratic elements placed in the statutes of the party (and never altered) in 1906. But on one question the rules were more strict. Lenin now held that:

? . . . the minority shall have the right to discuss before the whole party, disagreements on programme, tactics and organisation in a discussion journal especially published for the purpose, but shall not have the right to publish, in a rival newspaper, pronouncements disruptive of the actions and the decisions of the majority. ?23

Given the struggle with the Liquidators it was no longer permissible for a member of the RSDLP to advocate legality at any price, to deprecate the full slogans of the programme etc. Clearly the post-1912 party was more centralised and disciplined than it had been six years earlier. But this unanimity and discipline were not to remain unaltered in the year of revolution?1917.

The balance had to shift once more towards democracy to embrace the hundreds of thousands of young revolutionary workers who flooded into the party and helped it to make the revolution. But they found there a solid core of Bolsheviks who understood the party?s programme and tactics. They found also a lively internal democracy which enabled the party to re-elaborate its programme once more, to fuse with a Trotsky who had at last understood the essence and the correctness of Bolshevism.

Only such a party, built on such a method of organisation could lead millions of workers and peasants, organised in soviets, not only in a year of revolution but in three years of civil war. That this war tightened and narrow the democratic centralism of the party once more cannot be doubted. But it was the bureaucratisation caused by that war, by isolation and blockade and then by the openings for corruption which the New Economic Policy brought with it that created the social basis for destroying this party.

The tragic blunder of banning factions in the party in 1921, for which Lenin and Trotsky must take full responsibility, was based on the mistaken view that the danger from without, from the Kulaks, the Nepmen and the world bourgeoisie, was greater than that from within the party and the state apparatus. To damage or weaken the self-righting mechanism of inner party democracy helped this process of bureaucratisation and hampered the struggle of Trotsky and the Left Opposition against it.

But any abandoning or damaging of democratic centralism, from the left, from a libertarian direction would have done no good at all. It would have hastened the break up of the proletarian dictatorship.
The whole history of the party to 1917, and indeed until 1921, was one not only of remorseless struggle against capitalism (including after 1914 against imperialist war) but of vigorous internal debates. Bolshevism was neither bureaucratic nor monolithic. Nor was it sectarian; it won a leading role at the head of the masses and made a revolution.

The Leninist party and democratic centralism did not spring fully formed from the brow of Lenin. No single work of his, not even What Is To Be Done, contains a blueprint for it. Nevertheless it would be quite wrong to deduce from this that there are no Leninist principles of organisation or that Lenin was a free wheeling pragmatist?or worse a cynical manoeuvrer on these questions. The reality and the theory emerged in the class struggle and in sharp internal and external battles and polemics between would-be socialists and revolutionaries over the three decades of Lenin?s political life. Each stage of it contributed something vital. He did not think that he was inventing ?a party of a new type?. Yet that, in the end, was what he succeeded in doing.

He developed a theory and a practice of the party as organising the vanguard fighters of the working class. They would literally be found in the forefront of all the battles of the working class, both economic and political. They would be the most class conscious elements who were able to survive and re-orient in the downswings of mass struggle as well as in the upswings, in times of defeat and retreat as well as in those of revolutionary upsurge and victory. These vanguard elements had to be able to hold steady during the inevitable rapid changes in working class consciousness: able to resist the passivity, backwardness and reactionary ideas when they were dominant as well as head the class in times of militant offensive.

Lenin developed his views on the party through a series of stages of building one: from an initial period of circles devoted at first to pure propaganda and then engaging in attempts at agitation, then rival émigré ideological currents engaged in a fierce struggle trying to develop a programme, tactical principles and a centralised organisational structure. Only the latter, when it establishes roots among the vanguard fighters of the working class, is worthy of the name party.

Lenin learned by bitter experience to see that this struggle was a ceaseless one?necessary through all stages of party building. He learned that these stages do not form an ascending unbroken curve. They are interrupted by crises, collapses, splits as well as by fusions, returns to earlier stages and rapid advances.

Lenin came to realise that capitalist (and pre-capitalist) society was not a passive bystander in the history and development of the workers? movement and its organisations. Through its varied strata, its academic establishment, its press, as well as through its police forces, parties and judiciary, it exerts enormous pressure on the working class and its organisations. To build a revolutionary workers? party is not only to struggle against the bosses and their state forces. It is to struggle against bourgeois (and petty bourgeois) influences and those who carry these influences into the workers? ranks?who objectively or subjectively are agents of these alien classes.

What Lenin sought at a every stage was the sharpest ideological clarity on programmatic goals, on tactical principles, and on the methods of organisation needed to carry these into life. For this reason he often reserved his hardest blows for the compromisers confusionists and conciliators who made it difficult for workers to see who were their friends and who their enemies. This did not represent a mania for splits and polemics but the realisation that to wait, with a passive optimism, for experience to reveal all was to give the outright traitors and hopeless vacillators a golden opportunity to throw the workers? struggle into confusion and defeat at the vital moment.

If internal struggle and political demarcation was a constant component of political life, if splits and unifications were necessary to assemble a political leadership for the working class capable of taking the initiative at the decisive moment, then the principles of internal party life had to allow for this. These principles, which in 1905 came to be known as democratic centralism, enabled a strategy to be worked out as well as the fighters to be assembled and trained to implement it.
The LRCI stands by those principles. We apply them to every stage of party building. We recognise that we are much nearer the earliest stages of Lenin’s struggle than the later ones. Consequently, at the present stage a living internal democracy has to be combined with a high degree of theoretical and programmatic homogeneity. We reject entirely the “discussion forum” view of party building, so fashionable at the moment. We reject the idea that theory and theorists must have complete freedom of expression whereas the practical people, especially workers, have to make do with unity in action.

For us the Lenin of Iskra and of Proletary is a legitimate model for fighting through the confusion of sects and factions that exist today. But we do not make a virtue of necessity, nor imagine that a mass vanguard workers’ party can run its internal life like a propaganda organisation? a fighting propaganda group. To do so would be to advocate not democratic but bureaucratic centralism. And this would mean death for any attempt to build a revolutionary workers’ party.

Footnotes
3. V.I. Lenin, Collected Works, Vol 5 Moscow 1963 p17
4. ibid.
5. V.I. Lenin, op cit Vol 5 pp 465/66
7. V.I. Lenin, Against Revisionism, Moscow 1966 p106
8. V.I. Lenin op cit Vol 8, p144
9. V.I. Lenin op cit, Vol 10 p253
10. ibid p31
12. ibid, pp128-29
15 P. Le Blanc, op cit, p129
16 VI Lenin op cit Vol10 p314
17 P Le Blanc, op cit, p131
18 Lenin op cit Vol11 p361
20 VI Lenin op cit Vol 16 p77.
21 VI Lenin op cit Vol 18 p409.
22 ibid, p408-09
23. V I Lenin op cit Vol 20 pp 518/19

Source URL: http://www.fifthinternational.org/content/leninist-party-and-democratic-centralism