Parliament: Bolsheviks in the Duma

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How should revolutionary socialists act in parliament? Should we risk legitimising powerless legislative bodies? And how do we stop the workers? MPs from being corrupted in the bosses? parliaments? These were some of the problems faced by the Bolsheviks before the First World War.

After the 1905 revolution in Russia was defeated the Tsar established a ?Duma? (parliament). The Russian socialists had been split between Bolshevik (revolutionary) and Menshevik (moderate) wings, but were temporarily reunited at this point.

Should the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) stand candidates and participate in the Duma? Previously they had boycotted the proposed Duma in favour of a revolutionary government based on the workers? councils (soviets) that grew up during 1905. But by the time the 1906 Duma was convened the soviets had been smashed, and the workers? movement had suffered a serious defeat.

The Tsar felt confident enough to dismiss the first Duma within a few months, considering its liberal capitalist majority (The (Constitutional-Democrats or ?Cadets?) too radical after they clashed with the nobility over land reform. The second Duma lasted a little longer; it too was dissolved in June 1907.

By then a period of reaction was in full swing. Stolypin, the Tsar?s chief minister, presided over a third Duma whose electoral system was designed to ensure the radical demands of workers and peasants found no voice in the assembly. It was dominated by outright proto-fascists, the so called ?Black Hundred? pogrom politicians.

The Bolsheviks boycotted the 1905 Duma. The Stockholm unity Congress of 1906, where there was a Menshevik majority, decided to stand candidates for the second Duma and 12 Mensheviks and 11 Bolsheviks were elected. When it was dissolved, the RSDLP fraction was arrested and put on trial: many of the MPs went straight into prison camps.

The Bolshevik faction of the RSDLP had submitted to the decision of the Stockholm Congress, but ?unity? could not disguise the deep differences between the two factions of the united party. By 1906 the Mensheviks believed the revolution had been smashed and that Russia had embarked on the road to a constitutional monarchy. They welcomed the Cadet majority, and called for ?responsible government? - i.e. a constitutional monarchy.

The Bolsheviks had a very different perspective. They recognised the workers had suffered a serious defeat, but realised 1905 had been just the first engagement with the enemy. They expected a new revolutionary upsurge following on the heels of 1905. When this upsurge failed to materialise, and the Stolypin ?coup? took place in 1907, divisions started to appear within the Bolsheviks.

The majority around Alexander Bogdanov wanted to withdraw from the Duma and boycott the elections. Lenin opposed this. He recognised that Russia was moving into a different period, when the workers would
be on the defensive for a considerable period. Lenin said every method of struggle, legal and illegal, had to be used to reach the largest number of workers. As he put it in debate with Bogdanov: the third Duma is a "cowshed", but if it was in the interests of the workers to spend time in it, the Bolsheviks would.

Lenin had no illusions in the Mensheviks’ approach to the Duma, but at the 1907 Fourth Congress he blocked with them to defeat Bogdanov’s call for a boycott. Lenin’s own proposal to take part in the Duma in a revolutionary way was only passed with Menshevik support, with the majority of Bolsheviks voting against. Lenin gradually won the majority for his position and in 1909 the Bogdanov group was expelled.

The third and fourth Dumas ran their full terms. Between 1907 and 1914 the Bolsheviks had a continuous presence in the parliament, first in a united Social Democratic fraction with the Mensheviks, then - from 1913 - as a separate Bolshevik fraction. The two Dumas covered very different periods.

The period 1907 to 1912 was a period of demoralisation among the working class. The gains made in wages and conditions during 1905 were eroded. The employers used the blacklist to drive out militant workers from the factories: the lock-out became a chosen weapon to break strikes and the unions.

The workers’ organisations functioned in semi-legal: trade unions were regularly dissolved, and the secret police worked hand in glove with the bosses to imprison active militants.

The RSDLP was an illegal organisation whose leadership functioned abroad. Its underground organisation suffered badly from repression, desertions and splits after 1907. Zinoviev, one of a later generation of leaders, could talk of the (Bolshevik) party being in a state of disintegration by 1909 and having to be "rebuilt? from the bottom up.

The early revival of the workers’ movement coincided with elections for the fourth Duma in 1912. A massacre of miners on strike in the Lena Goldfields of Siberia set off a wave of protest strikes in both St Petersburg and Moscow.

Pravda was launched at this time as a daily paper. Officially it had no connection with the Bolsheviks. The editors were constantly fined; many of its issues seized by the censor; its offices were raided and searched. But it remained the most powerful weapon and organising focus for the Bolsheviks - a workers’ paper whose circulation reached 140,000 by 1914. Pravda worked closely with the Bolshevik deputies, at one point Badayev, elected to the Duma in 1912 was also its publisher.

One of the advantages of having revolutionary MPs in the Duma was that their speeches could be legally published in Pravda and as leaflets. As the MPs also had immunity from prosecution, unlike other Social Democratic workers, they could not be arrested for making "inflammatory speeches". The Bolshevik MPs made full use of this immunity while it lasted.

Strict party discipline was enforced to make sure the MPs did not get corrupted by the privileges they enjoyed and the plush surroundings of the Duma. For revolutionaries, the parliamentary group is not the party leadership but a unit of the party under the control of the wider membership.

Lenin compared the arrangement to an army command structure: "A parliamentary group is not a general staff but rather a unit of trumpeters in one case, or a reconnaissance unit in another."

The elections of 1912 showed the growing strength of the Bolsheviks. The Duma electoral system was designed ensure an overwhelming majority for the ruling landlords and capitalists. Those who were entitled to vote were divided into four separate electoral groups known as "curiae": landowners, urban middle class, peasants and workers.
Just like the MPs in Tony Blair’s electoral college, the vote of a landlord was worth 45 times that of a worker! Elections were indirect. The workers, for example, had to elect representatives from their factories, these had to meet to elect “electors”, then the electors were sent to the electoral colleges, where all four groups sat. It was these colleges that elected the deputies! The workers were only guaranteed six deputies in the whole parliament.

The names of Bolshevik candidates could only be released a day or so before a vote, to prevent them being arrested or sacked. Despite this, all the candidates put forward to the electoral colleges from the workers’ curiae were Bolsheviks.

In a straight fight with the Mensheviks, the Bolsheviks swept the board - four metal workers and two textile workers formed the Bolshevik “six” in the 1912 Duma. The Mensheviks had six MPs - largely elected from rural areas on a platform of opposing national oppression in the Tsarist empire. The real expression of workers’ anger was funneled through the Bolsheviks.

The Bolsheviks put forward three key demands at this period; the democratic republic, the eight hour day and the confiscation of the landed estates. This was a programme for the destruction of the tsarist regime based on a revolutionary solution to the land question.

In addition to the three strategic demands, the Bolsheviks argued for a whole series of partial reforms: freedom of assembly, freedom for trade unions to organise, freedom of speech. But the Mensheviks raised only these partial demands - not the full programme of revolutionary democracy. Instead of winning them votes, as they expected, the Mensheviks’ half hearted reformist programme lost them support among militant workers.

The Mensheviks’ increasing reformism was reflected in the relationship of MPs to the party membership. They saw their MPs as “above” the party. Their leader, Chkheidze, refused to attend a party conference to defend his tendency to ignore party policy in the Duma.

Being a revolutionary delegate in a reactionary parliament was no easy matter for workers elected straight from the shop floor. Badayev in his book, Bolsheviks in the Tsarist Duma, talks of the nervousness they felt when they had to speak:

"Each of us experienced great difficulty when making his first speech in the home of the Tsarist autocracy. It was a great strain to talk down the howling of the Black Hundreds, to fight against the continual interruption of the chairman, and, having described the political and economic enslavement of the working class, to challenge its oppressors."

Lenin summed up the difference between the future of the workers’ representatives and the other parliamentarians: “Some leave the Duma rostrum to become ministers, others, workers’ deputies, to become convicts.”

The Bolsheviks used parliamentary procedure to the full to make the case for revolutionary socialist politics: they put questions to ministers; they framed Bills that had no chance of being passed. That was because they understood that the Duma - like all capitalist parliaments - could not change much: it had to be used as a soapbox to address wide layers of the working class.

In April 1914 the deputies brought the Duma to a standstill by obstructing the budget. Each deputy was expelled from the chamber, but only after defending themselves at length and having to be physically removed by Duma guards. Outside Pravda organised strikes and demonstrations in their support.

The MPs regularly formed the organising centre for collections for strikers. Using their immunity, the MPs
would regularly address the strikers, demand to see and protest to the management, and denounce the police to their faces for their brutality.

Not surprisingly this activity focused the hatred of the tsarist regime on the Bolshevik fraction. Within weeks of the outbreak of war in 1914 the police raided an underground Bolshevik conference and arrested the five remaining Bolshevik deputies. They were stripped of their immunity and charged with treason, having in their possession the Bolshevik declaration against the imperialist world war. All were sentenced to hard labour terms in Siberia, terms which were mercifully cut short by the outbreak of the 1917 February revolution.

But the experience of these Bolsheviks proved invaluable. Their work demonstrated how revolutionaries could use elections and parliaments to advance the cause of the working class without for one minute spreading the illusion that parliaments or elections to them were the real means of securing lasting victory for that cause.

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