

The Communist International and the Construction of Factory Cells (part 1)

Introduction

The following article is the first of what we hope will be a three part series. The one published here presents an over-view of the Communist International's theory and practice of factory cell construction in the 1920s. The second will follow with a study of the struggles around cell construction in two important European Communist Parties in this same period, the British and the French. The third article will examine the building of factory cells by the Communist Party, USA in the 1920s and 1930s.

The reasons we are devoting so much space to this question should be made clear from the start. The basic strength of the world communist movement lies in its union or fusion of Communist theory and the Workers' Movement. The key organizational form which the communist parties have adopted traditionally to cement this union has been the factory cell. And yet the history of the communist parties is the history of a general inability to establish these cells and of their inability to function even in the few places and brief periods in which they could be organized.

If the cell form is indeed necessary for the organization of the American communist movement, and its future Party, we must clearly understand this fact and we cannot afford to repeat past errors in this regard. To begin to correctly grasp the lessons of communist organizational history we are publishing these articles.

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In the history of world communism the period of the mid-1920s, also known as the period of Bolshevization, has remained until recently a forgotten era--forgotten both by the Communists themselves and by the historians of their movement. While much has been written about the origins

and founding of the Communist International and on the latter popular front period, as well as about the histories of many of the more important Communist parties, there is almost no secondary material on the Bolshevization of the Comintern and its sections.

This process of Bolshevization had many aspects, one of the most important being the theoretical and ideological transformation of the new Communist Parties from Social Democratic organizations into "Bolshevik" ones, i.e., ones guided by Leninism. Equally important in the eyes of the Comintern was the organizational transformation of their basic organizational unit from the residential branch or club to the factory cell or nucleus.

This article concerns Bolshevization in its organizational aspects as it was formulated in the Communist International in the 1920s. This does not mean that theoretical or ideological issues will be slighted; on the contrary, they were at the heart of the differences over Bolshevization and we hope to show, central to its failure.

Immediately after the successful Bolshevik revolution and the end of World War I groups and organizations in Europe, America and Asia began to emulate the tactics and methods which they perceived responsible for the victory in Russia and which appeared to be equally applicable in their own countries. The idea of Bolshevization itself, however, only arose in the mid-1920s as a reaction to a whole series of factors: the decline of the revolutionary upsurge characteristic of the immediate post-war period; the defeat of the Hungarian, German and Austrian revolutions; the fascist seizure of power in Italy; and the "retreat" of the Russian Revolution signaled by the New Economic Policy (NEP).

Necessary in these new conditions were on the one hand the tactic of the United Front and on the other a firmer grasp on organizational technique. The first to strengthen the links between the Party and the non-party masses; the second to strengthen the Party internally, and to facilitate the recruitment of workers en masse.

As early as the Third Comintern Congress in 1921 the Executive Committee of the CI (ECCI) secured passage of a lengthy resolution on a proposed organizational structure for the member parties, a structure largely copied from that of the Bolshevik Party. In addition to a general statement of principles it proposed the formation of Communist cells in factories and workshops and laid down a number of these on their function and activities.¹

Since the majority of the Communist parties were still in their infancy the resolution remained largely on paper, a fact which drew a sharp response from Lenin at the next Comintern Congress the following year (1922). He characterized the resolution of the Third Congress as "too Russian" in spirit and called its passage "a great mistake" for although it was, he said, "an excellent resolution" nonetheless "everything in it has remained a dead letter."

Part of the problem, Lenin stated, was that communists were mechanically copying the resolution. Their task was not to treat it as a "miraculous picture" to be hung on the wall and "prayed to" but as an example to be learned from.² These remarks were seconded at the congress by Grigorii Zinoviev, Chairman of the Communist International, who urged all the parties to proceed with the implementation of a genuine communist reorganization.

Recognizing that this task would not be an easy one, the ECCI in January 1924 unanimously adopted a new resolution on factory cells which laid the basis for a renewed impetus toward reorganization. The resolution presented an historical discussion of the reasons for Bolshevization.

It explained that organizational form was a direct reflection of political strategy. Since social democracy saw its road to power through the ballot box and electoral struggles its organizational structure was based in electoral districts and residential voting areas. The Communists, in opposition to this reformist strategy, saw their victory as the result of the organization of the workingclass for the violent seizure of state power. To this revolutionary strategy, the Comintern insisted, corresponded the factory

cell form of organization.

Consequently the resolution proposed that wherever three or more communists found themselves working in the same factory or shop they were to constitute themselves as a cell, gather together and organize the rest of the workers against the capitalists and the state, publish their own shop paper and recruit active fighters into the Party. Cell members were not only to agitate in the factory but also to carry the struggle to wherever the workers lived.

The resolution recognized that the Communist Parties at that point in time (1924) were still organized along Social Democratic lines and, noting that the question of cell organization was a novel one for many, suggested that it be first thoroughly discussed and popularized within the parties before any attempt at actual implementation was begun.³

Perhaps the major event which caused a note of urgency in this call was the aftermath of the defeat suffered by the most important section of the Comintern after the Russian Party, the Communist Party of Germany (KPD). In the autumn of 1923 the ECCI under Zinoviev's direction had helped the KPD to prepare for an armed seizure of power, based on an estimate of the readiness of the masses for action which proved to be without foundation. This failure which came to be known as "the German October" justified all the fears present in leading Comintern circles concerning the lack of any real ties between the European Communist Parties and the European workingclass.

The first step in this process of Bolshevization or reorganization was the reorganization by the Communist International of its own executive. A special organizational bureau (Orgburo) was elected from the ECCI to complement the already existing Organizational department. The most important members of the Orgburo were Otto Kuusinen, Osip Pyatnitski, Jules Humbert-Droz, Ottomar Geschke, and Albert Treint.⁴ The first three were Comintern officials, while Treint and Geschke were representatives of the

French and German parties respectively.

The Fifth Congress of the Communist International which opened in Moscow in June 1924 was to be the occasion for Zinoviev to unleash the Bolshevization campaign. He set the tone for the Congress in his opening speech which declared that capitalism had achieved a degree of political stabilization for the first time since the end of the war, and that it was entering a "democratic-pacifist" era. This era, he argued, was bound to end the revolutionary upsurge and to sow illusions among the workers, to the detriment of the Communist Parties. This new situation required that the parties no longer fight for immediate revolution but instead lead the fight for revolutionary reforms as a preparation for future decisive class battles.⁵

In this situation the organizational consolidation of the parties was all important. The resolution on factory cells presented to the Congress by Pyatnitski stated: "the foundation of the Bolshevization of the Party is Party nuclei in factories, workshops, etc."⁶ It also went on to elaborate on some of the mechanics involved in this work.

No longer was reorganization left to some future date; the resolution demanded that the Congress make it one of the most important tasks of all parties. Further it called on the parties to transform their social composition through the massive recruitment of industrial workers until they constituted a majority of the membership.⁷

The immediate problem of what to do with the non-proletarian members forced the Comintern to concede the need for "residential cells" also called street nuclei or cells. Such cells were not to be equated with factory ones, nor were they viewed as anything more than a temporary phenomenon.

To aide the parties in implementing reorganization the ECCI issued a call for an International Organizational Conference for March 1925. Pyatnitski, as head of the Orgburo stressed the differences between the Russia in which the cell idea was born and the reality of Western Europe in

which it now was to be applied. In western Europe, he noted in the Conference call, legality had enabled the development of separate trade unions and workers parties, a situation which had led to the organizational separation of economic work and political struggles.

This was not the case with the Bolshevik Party, he added, since it arose under the Czarist regime in which both trade unions and workers' parties were illegal. The Bolsheviks were forced to create cells in the factories, and in the absence of trade unions, were required to link constantly the economic struggle against the bourgeoisie with the political struggle against Czarism. This unity of economic and political practice was, said Pyatnitski, embodied in the factory cell and constituted the basis for the victory of the Russian communists, just as its absence was a prime cause of the weakness of the western parties.⁸

When the organizational Conference opened in Moscow in March 1925 delegations were present from Germany, France, Great Britain, the United States, Italy, Czechoslovakia, the Communist Youth International, and the CI Orgburo. These delegations by and large represented leaderships which enjoyed Zinoviev's support and were thus eager to show their enthusiasm for reorganization. This was most true of the representatives of the French Party (PCF) and of the Communist Youth International.

The French announced that they had set a deadline for completion of their reorganization, April 1, 1925. Declaring that they were simply dissolving the old branches and putting everyone into factory cells, the PCF delegate denounced the idea of street cells, and criticised other delegations for supporting their formation.⁹

The Communist Youth International delegate, Richard Gyptner, also reported that they had set a deadline for reorganization of the various Young Communist Leagues. He reported that already 50% of the German League's membership was reorganized into 600 factory cells.¹⁰

Pyatnitski, on behalf of the Orgburo, cut through these boasts by pointing out that the majority of established cells were neglected by the national Party leaderships, that they met infrequently, and then only to discuss petty matters. This led the workers in western Europe to ask, he reported, "why do we need these new organizations which accomplish nothing and because of which we might lose our jobs?"¹¹

Likewise Pyatnitski cautioned the delegates not to mechanically universalize their experiences nor to reject out of hand the street cells, particularly in countries where as much as 40% of party members were unemployed. He also sought to dissassociate himself from the more extreme remarks of the delegates from France and the communist youth.¹²

By mid May 1925 it was clear that the rapid reorganization promised by the Parties was a failure. Pyatnitski told the Orgburo in that month:

It is evident that the proportion of factory cells which work badly is very large. In the PCF, out of 2,500 cells, 1,000 work indifferently, 750 work badly, and 750 work very well. In the Berlin-Brandenburg districts (KPD) out of 1,800 cells, 540 work tolerably well, while the remaining 1,260 have not been drawn into the work...¹³

Growing dissatisfaction with the Zinoviev supported leaderships of many of the European parties, with their left lines and their widespread use of administrative methods against any and all opposition had been developing within these parties even before the hasty and badly directed reorganization drives. Their failure only strengthened the opposition forces.

Already in March Zinoviev had convoked the Fifth Plenum of the ECCI, which he heralded as the "Plenum of Bolshevization." Branding the oppositional forces within the Comintern as enemies of Bolshevization Zinoviev nonetheless admitted that the CI "could claim no great successes since the Fifth Congress."

He now formulated the value of Bolshevization as consisting not so much in its organizational effects as in its effects on the inner-Party struggles raging in the West. He warned that Bolshevization would be used as a weapon against both right and "ultra-left" tendencies wherever they appeared.¹⁴

The theses adopted at the plenum warned against "mechanical discipline" and "bureaucratic methods" in reorganization and insisted that "under all circumstances...the Communist Party must preserve a certain amount of freedom of internal party criticism."¹⁵ This was largely a concession to the demands of the opposition, which correctly viewed the reorganizational efforts of some party leaderships as efforts to consolidate their positions at the expense of other tendencies within these parties.

In an effort to put the construction of factory cells on a better footing the ECCI convoked another organizational conference for February 1926. This conference was to discuss not so much the idea of reorganization but the specific problems which had arisen in the process of cell formation.

The most important distinction between the second conference and the first consisted in the differing assessments of the various delegations present from one conference to the next. In place of the rosy picture of organizational progress presented at the 1925 conference, the 1926 conference was marked by abundant self-criticism and sober reassessments. By the frankness of the criticisms presented the real limitations of the Bolshevization campaign and factory cell organization in the world parties was underlined.

Walter Ulbricht for the KPD told the conference, "we have no illusions about our cells; we know full well that we have for the most part very ineffective cells. Most of the 2,000 German cells are still politically dead."¹⁶ A delegate from the Communist Youth International admitted, "we cannot say today that in a single League...the reorganization has been accomplished. On the contrary, even all that

which had been achieved has slipped back."¹⁷

Delegate after delegate arose to observe that reorganization had not been completed; that where cells existed, they did not function; and that in some cases cells were in no way different from the old branches. Many criticized their former opposition to street cells and pointed out that it had led to the drowning of workers by non-workers in the supposedly factory based cells. Some told of cells with five members in the same factory and the other ten to fifteen cell members "attached" from outside, a situation which prevented the cell from working effectively in that factory due to the indifference of the "attached" members.

Many delegates, particularly those from France and Italy, reported the crystalization of opposition blocs and their use of the errors committed in reorganization against the established leaderships. The problem of factionalism was not limited to western Europe as 1926 also witnessed the struggle within the CPSU (B) between the Stalin leadership and the Leningrad opposition of Zinoviev, a struggle which was beginning to endanger the latter's position as head of the Communist International.

To bolster his position, Zinoviev called the Sixth Plenum of the ECCI for February 1926. For the first time open criticism was heard from the left, against the reorganization campaign and factory cell construction. Zinoviev sought to stifle his opponents by invoking the reorganization campaign and its value in rooting out non-Bolshevik elements. He was challenged on this and a number of other points by the leader of the Italian Communist Party, Amadeo Bordiga.

Bordiga disputed the idea that the problems of the western parties could be solved with the creation of factory cells contending, "to solve the problem of revolution it is not enough to issue an organizational formula. These are problems of forces and not of forms."¹⁸ Defiantly admitting, "I contest that the Communist Parties must be necessarily organized on a factory cell basis," Bordiga presented the

reasons for the left opposition to factory cells as the basic unit of Party organization. He declared that he reorganized their value as action bodies carrying out the line of the Party in the factories but denied their ability to be the basic unit in determining Party line and policy.

The factory cells, he insisted, were characterized by short meetings, a low level of political education, and were further limited by state and employer repression. This prevented their acting at the level of theoretical and political ability necessary for a basic party unit. For this, Bordiga concluded, some kind of territorial unit would be necessary.¹⁹

His was, however, the only voice raised in opposition to factory cells at the Plenum, for it was precisely the willingness of the factory cells of most Parties to support their leaderships against the "right" and "left" oppositions that constituted for the ECCI their political and theoretical ability.

Thus it was not the oppositions within the Communist Parties which brought to a close the Bolshevization era, but the failure of the Zinoviev opposition in the CPSU (B). The Sixth Plenum was the last one held under the chairmanship of Zinoviev; in December he was removed as chairman and the post itself was abolished. With his passing the Bolshevization campaign and reorganization gradually receded into the background, ceasing to play the important role he had assigned it.

Nonetheless the notion that reorganization had actually occurred and that the world parties were now constituted on a factory cell basis persisted. The report of the Organization Department to the Sixth World Congress of the Communist International in 1928 declared:

Towards the end of 1927 almost all Party organizations had been in the main reconstructed, in which connection the overwhelming majority of factory cells are more or less firmly welded organizations, tried in revolutionary battles and severe police persecution.²⁰

This claim does not correspond to the figures presented by the parties themselves, nor with the figures presented by Pyatnitski at the Tenth Plenum in 1929. At that time Pyatnitski admitted that the actual number of cells had declined between 1926 and 1927. In Germany, for example, the number of factory cells declined from 2243 in 1926 to 2107 in 1927 and 1556 in 1928. In the same period while 60% of Party members were in factories; in 1927 only 15% and in 1928 only 12% were in factory cells. In some areas, such as Berlin-Brandenburg, membership in factory cells decreased from 60% in 1926 to 25% in 1928.²¹ And he stated that similar figures were available for all the major parties.

In addition Pyatnitski showed that a steadily increasing majority of party members were in street cells but that these bodies functioned similar to the old social democratic branches: "all the data at our disposal tells us that in their work they do not differ in the least from the old residential organizations."²²

This was the situation as presented at the Tenth Plenum in 1929. The inauguration of the Third Period in Comintern history, after the great depression, saw a revival of the interest in factory cells but this was more in theory than in practice as the vast majority of Communists in the early 1930s were unemployed, or outside the large scale industrial works, idled by the depression. With the introduction of the strategy of the united and popular fronts in 1934-35 the factory cells were again pushed into the background.

What was the significance of the Bolshevization campaign? How successful was reorganization?, and what was the merit of the criticisms made of it by Bordiga and others? What lessons can we draw from this period in Comintern history for the work of building a genuine communist party in the United States? Before we can answer these questions it is necessary to examine the development of factory cell construction in several important communist parties, including the Communist Party of the United States. This we hope to do in the next two articles.

(to be continued)
(notes to follow end of series)