

Why Class-Struggle Socialists Fight Elections

written by Dan Davison | August 14, 2024



Once again, the socialist left is debating its stance on elections. In most cases, this discussion revolves around three linked questions: (1) should we stand candidates for election and, if so, (2) what electoral strategy should we adopt and (3) how does this activity relate to our broader political strategy? With several internationally significant elections this year, perhaps most obviously the U.S. presidential election, the debate's rekindling is hardly surprising. For those of us on the Marxist left, this controversy intimately connects with larger questions about the state, bourgeois democracy, and class struggle.

As a matter of left-wing common sense, it is easy to agree that socialists should connect electoral and parliamentary activity with extra-parliamentary organizing and mobilization. In other words, many on the left can intuitively agree that socialists should avoid the Scylla of an electoralist approach that views getting left-wingers voted into office as the primary means of achieving political change and the Charybdis of an "ultra-leftist" approach that altogether rejects standing candidates for election.

Still, this general point of agreement tells us very little about *why* class-struggle socialists contest elections in the first place. Much of this turns on *what* class-struggle socialists aim to achieve by contesting elections, which is important for informing *how* class-struggle socialists should approach electoral campaigning and parliamentary practice.

Therefore, it is worth refreshing the basic aims of socialist electoral and parliamentary activity outlined by key Marxist theorists and revolutionaries, including how these aims relate to the overarching goal of advancing the working-class struggle.

Gauging the Party and Movement's Strength

Collecting and analyzing voter data might seem far removed from revolutionary activity, but such number crunching allows a party to measure the strength of the different forces at play, including its own. This is important for determining what actions the party has the capacity to take. In his "Introduction to Marx's Class Struggles in France" (1895), Engels notes that the general franchise "informed us, accurately, of our own strength as well as of that of all opposing parties, and gave us thereby a gauge for proportioning our action such as cannot be duplicated, [which] restrained us from untimely hesitation as well as from untimely daring."¹

Lenin put this basic insight into practice with the Bolsheviks' interventions in the Duma, the toothless parliament that the tsarist regime reluctantly established because of the Russian Revolution of 1905. In 1912, the Bolsheviks adopted a platform for that year's Duma elections and the launch of their campaign coincided with the publication of *Pravda*, their first legal newspaper. Lenin attentively followed the growth of both the party's newspaper and the party's membership alongside the elections' development. Following the elections, he wrote detailed statistical analyses of their significance, including the votes received by each party.²

When the Bolshevik deputies were first elected to the Duma, Lenin sent them a comprehensive questionnaire asking about almost every aspect of the election campaign, such as how many workers supported them, how the different parts of the party platform were accepted, and what questions

and arguments workers raised.³ This information-gathering aspect of Bolshevik electoral and parliamentary activity extended beyond election campaigns and debriefs. In his memoirs on the Bolsheviks' experiences with the Duma, Alexei Badayev recalls how elected Bolshevik deputies were instructed to visit their districts as frequently as possible and generally maintain close contact with their constituencies. Their correspondence "supplied detailed information of what was taking place and in which various recommendations and demands were expressed," which "served as material for our Duma work, was worked up and summarized in questions to the government and dealt with in our speeches on government bills, etc."⁴

One sees this same emphasis in Lenin's criticism of the Duma fraction's cease-and-desist warning to the organizers of a planned protest at the opening of the Fourth Duma on November 15, 1912. The idea for the protest came from rank-and-file workers in the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) and other organizations. When criticizing the Duma fraction, Lenin explained how "a real workers' deputy" would have known how to make inquiries and learned "from the prominent workers ... how matters stood, what the workers *thought* about, and *what the mood* of the masses was."⁵ In short, through electoral and parliamentary activity, socialists can gather vital information about the strength of the party and the movement and the conditions in which they are operating.

Agitation and Propaganda

Of course, it is not simply a matter of measuring the strength of our existing forces: we also seek to *build* these forces by spreading class-struggle socialist ideas throughout the working class. This is another important function of elections that Engels recognized in his aforementioned 1895 Introduction, where he noted that electoral participation "furnished us a means, such as there is no other, of getting in touch with the masses of the people that are still far removed from us, of forcing all parties to defend their views and actions against our attacks before all the people."⁶

In Marxist terms, electoral and parliamentary activity are a means of agitation and propaganda. As per Plekhanov's classic formulation, "the propagandist conveys many ideas to a single person or to a few people, whereas the agitator conveys only one or a few ideas, but he conveys them to a whole mass of people, sometimes to almost the entire population of a particular locality."⁷

Again, Lenin understood this well. In "The Election Campaign and the Election Platform" (1911), written the year before the Fourth Duma elections, he stressed that "[t]he Social-Democratic Party must launch its election campaign at *once*.... Intensified propaganda, agitation, and organization are on the order of the day, and the forthcoming elections provide a natural, inevitable, topical 'pretext' for such work."⁸

Bolshevik deputies in the Duma were seen as *workers'* deputies. Since there was no television or radio at the time, and the bourgeois press gave little coverage to the Bolshevik deputies, the Bolsheviks circulated their deputies' Duma speeches in pamphlets, leaflets, and - most importantly - *Pravda*. A resolution on "Elections to the Fourth Duma," adopted at the Sixth (Prague) All-Russia Conference of the RSDLP in 1912, provided that the main task of the party in the elections "is socialist, class propaganda, and the organization of the working class."⁹ The main election slogans, known as the "three whales of Bolshevism" after an old myth that the world rests upon three whales, were a democratic republic, the eight-hour working day, and confiscation of all landed estates. All propaganda on the remaining demands of the Social-Democratic minimum program, including universal franchise, state insurance for workers and freedom of association, had to be inseparably linked with the three main demands.

The lessons of the Bolsheviks' electoral campaigning informed early Comintern (Third International) theory and practice. In "*Left-Wing*" *Communism: An Infantile Disorder* (1920), Lenin summarized

the basic tasks and approach of the new “revolutionary parliamentarism” in a detailed passage worth quoting at length:

I have neither the time nor the space here to describe the “Russian” “Bolshevik” methods of participation in parliamentary elections and in the parliamentary struggle; I can, however, assure foreign Communists that they were quite unlike the usual West-European parliamentary campaigns. From this the conclusion is often drawn: “Well, that was in Russia, in our country parliamentarianism is different.” This is a false conclusion. Communists, adherents of the Third International in all countries, exist for the purpose of *changing*—all along the line, in all spheres of life—the old socialist, trade unionist, syndicalist, and parliamentary type of work into a *new* type of work, the communist.... The Communist must learn to create a new, uncustomary, non-opportunist, and non-careerist parliamentarianism; the Communist parties must issue their slogans; true proletarians, with the help of the unorganized and downtrodden poor, should distribute leaflets, canvass workers’ houses and cottages of the rural proletarians and peasants in the remote villages ... they should go into the public houses, penetrate into unions, societies and chance gatherings of the common people, and speak to the people, not in learned (or very parliamentary) language, they should not at all strive to “get seats” in parliament, but should everywhere try to get people to think, and draw the masses into the struggle, to take the bourgeoisie at its word and utilize the machinery it has set up, the elections it has appointed, and the appeals it has made to the people.... We must work to accomplish *practical* tasks, ever more varied and ever more closely connected with all branches of social life, winning branch after branch, and sphere after sphere *from the bourgeoisie*.¹⁰

One sees this general spirit in the Comintern’s adopted “Theses on the Communist Parties and Parliamentarism” (1920). These provide that “[p]articipation in election campaigns and revolutionary propaganda from the parliamentary rostrum is of particular importance for winning over those layers of the workers who previously, like, say, the rural toiling masses, stood far away from political life.”¹¹ Nevertheless, such activity, “which consists mainly in revolutionary agitation from the parliamentary rostrum, in unmasking opponents, in the ideological unification of the masses who still ... are captivated by democratic ideas, look towards the parliamentary rostrum, etc., should be totally and completely subordinated to the aims and tasks of the mass struggle outside parliament.”¹²

Exposing Bourgeois Democracy and the Other Parties

As that last quotation indicates, the agitation and propaganda functions of electoral and parliamentary activity strongly link with the need to expose the other parties and the bourgeois-democratic system in general, revealing the ruling-class interests they serve and their inability to deliver what the working class requires. In turn, this exposing function closely connects with the demands that socialists should push for in parliament.

In her classic piece on the “Eight-Hour Day at the Party Congress” (1902), Luxemburg skewers the so-called practical-political approach of moderating the party’s demands “in order to force the bourgeois parties to prove they meant their often repeated promises” to deliver on the more moderate reform.¹³ In context, she was criticizing the argument for putting forward a Reichstag bill for a ten-hour working day rather than the eight-hour day included in the party’s minimum program. As she goes on to say, “it is exactly by demanding the eight-hour bill that we can force the bourgeoisie to show its good will at least with a more modest reform”: “Even if we are ready to accept *any* installment, we must leave it to the bourgeois parties themselves to whittle down our demands to fit their interests.”¹⁴

The Bolsheviks' approach to bills and election campaigns built on this wisdom. They used these lines of activity to expose not only the tsarist government and political parties, but also the liberals and Mensheviks. Lenin advocated that Bolshevik deputies table the party's own plainly written Social-Democratic Bills in the Duma and put them to the vote, fully expecting the liberal Cadets and the reactionary Black Hundreds to turn them down. The Bolshevik deputies would then proceed to criticize the Cadet bill ruthlessly and submit regular amendments: "When amendments end we shall abstain from voting on the Cadet bill as a whole, leaving the Cadets to defeat the Black Hundreds, thereby taking no responsibility on ourselves before the people for the poverty and worthlessness of Cadet pseudo-democracy."¹⁵

As for the Mensheviks, Ralph Carter Elwood notes that "[b]y constantly harping on the correctness of the six Bolshevik Duma deputies and championing Bolshevik candidates in trade union and insurance elections, [*Pravda*] promoted factional identification which had been conspicuously absent before 1912."¹⁶ Doug Jenness corroborates this: through newspaper articles, petition collections, and factory debates with Menshevik deputies, the Bolsheviks waged a concerted campaign to solicit workers' support, which very successfully used the Bolshevik deputies' positions "to drive a wedge between the masses and the Mensheviks," pointing out that "the Mensheviks more and more wanted to adapt to the liberals on this or that question."¹⁷

Again, the Comintern Theses of 1920 reflect this experience. They provide that, where communists hold a majority in local government institutions, they should "at every opportunity show the limitations placed on really big changes by the bourgeois state power."¹⁸ Reiterating that the demonstrative draft laws communist members of parliament should regularly introduce "are not intended to be accepted by the bourgeois majority," the Theses state that "[e]very communist member of parliament must bear in mind that he is not a legislator seeking an understanding with other legislators, but a Party agitator who has been sent into the enemy camp" and "must use the parliamentary rostrum for the unmasking not only of the bourgeoisie and its hacks, but also of the social-patriots, and the reformists."¹⁹

These points link to an observation by Lenin in "*Left-Wing*" *Communism*: "far from causing harm to the revolutionary proletariat, participation in a bourgeois-democratic parliament ... actually helps that proletariat to *prove* to the backward masses why such parliaments deserve to be done away with; it *facilitates* their successful dissolution, and *helps* to make bourgeois parliamentarianism 'politically obsolete'." In other words, when approached correctly, electoral activity is integral to building revolutionary class consciousness throughout the diverse layers of the proletariat.²⁰

Providing Political Leadership over the Working-class Struggle

The matters of agitation and propaganda for socialism, and of exposing bourgeois democracy and the other parties, connect with the important issue of political leadership. Eminent Marxist thinkers have long grappled with the question of how the party can relate to mass working-class struggle in a way that can provide this leadership. As Luxemburg puts it in *The Mass Strike* (1906), "[t]he social democrats are the most enlightened, most class-conscious vanguard of the proletariat" and "the task of social democracy does not consist in the technical preparation and direction of mass strikes, but, first and foremost, in the *political leadership* of the whole movement."²¹ This is not to suggest that the party can simply call mass strikes into being by issuing slogans: a point Luxemburg underscores repeatedly in the pamphlet. Nevertheless, the social democrats "cannot and dare not wait, in a fatalist fashion, with folded arms for the advent of the 'revolutionary situation.'" And "should they become, in a *political sense*, the rulers of the whole movement, then they must, with the utmost clearness, consistency and resoluteness, inform the German proletariat of their tactics and aims in the period of coming struggle."²²

This basic idea underpins the Bolshevik approach to electoral and parliamentary activity. As Lenin puts it:

The primary task of the Social Democrats entering the Duma is to wrest away from the liberals those democratic elements that are still under their sway; to become the leader of those democrats; to teach them to seek support in the people and join ranks, with the masses down below, to unfurl *our own* banner before the whole of the working class and before the entire impoverished and famine-stricken peasant masses.²³

Like other aspects of the Bolsheviks' experience of the Duma, this informed the thought and practice of the early Comintern. Paul Le Blanc observes that, in early Comintern work, "there is considerable stress on the need for [a revolutionary vanguard] to be organically rooted in the working class, which often meant participating in nonrevolutionary organizations and institutions, whether 'reformist' trade unions or bourgeois-democratic parliaments, as well as being able to form united fronts with moderate Social Democratic parties and others in the immediate and daily struggles of the working class."²⁴

One sees this in the Theses of 1920, which provide that "[e]lection campaigns should not be carried out in the spirit of the hunt for the maximum number of parliamentary seats, but in the spirit of the revolutionary mobilisation of the masses for the slogans of the proletarian revolution."²⁵ As the Theses go on to say, "Communist members of parliament must use every means at their disposal (under the supervision of the Party) to create written and any other kind of links with the revolutionary workers, peasants and other toilers," and "[i]n the event of demonstrations by workers in the streets and other revolutionary actions, the communist members of parliament have the duty to place themselves in the most conspicuous leading place at the head of the masses of workers."²⁶

Creating "the Subjective Factor"

Drawing the preceding threads together, all these basic aims of electoral and parliamentary activity arise from the overarching need to build the working-class's ability to take political power. This is why the quoted Marxist thinkers and leaders consistently emphasize building the working-class's socialist consciousness and collective strength (including their confidence in that collective strength), as well as increasing the mobilization and active participation of workers in struggle. As Luxemburg puts it in her enduring polemic *Reform or Revolution* (1900), parliamentary activity, along with trade-union struggle, "prepares the proletariat, that is to say, creates the *subjective* factor of the socialist transformation, for the task of realising socialism": it is "vastly important in so far as [it makes] socialistic the *awareness*, the consciousness, of the proletariat and help to organize it as a class."²⁷

As many of the sources quoted in this article underscore, the extra-parliamentary arena is more important than the parliamentary arena and therefore should be prioritized. All the same, one can grasp how, when pursued with the right aims and in the right manner, electoral and parliamentary activity can help bridge the gap between, on the one hand, current, everyday, working-class struggles for reforms and, on the other hand, the need for the working class to seize power and remake society under its leadership. This, in short, is why class-struggle socialists fight elections.

Notes

1. Frederick Engels, "Introduction to Marx's Class Struggles in France" (1895).
2. Doug Jenness, *Lenin as Election Campaign Manager* (Pathfinder Press, 2015 [1971]), p. 10.

3. *ibid* p. 13.
4. Alexei Badayez, *The Bolsheviks in the Tsarist Duma* (1926), ch. 6.
5. Quoted in August H. Nimtz, *The Ballot, the Streets, or Both? From Marx and Engels to Lenin and the October Revolution* (Haymarket Books, 2019 [2014]), p. 295.
6. Engels, "Introduction to Marx's Class Struggles in France."
7. Georgi Plekhanov, *The Tasks of the Russian Social Democrats in the Famine* (1892).
8. Vladimir Lenin, "The Election Campaign and the Election Platform" (1911).
9. Reproduced in Nimtz, *The Ballot, the Streets, or Both?*, pp. 424-6.
10. Vladimir Lenin, *"Left-Wing" Communism: An Infantile Disorder* (1920), ch. 10.
11. "Theses on the Communist Parties and Parliamentarism" (1920).
12. *ibid*.
13. Rosa Luxemburg, "Eight-Hour Day at the Party Congress" (1902).
14. *ibid*.
15. Quoted in Nimtz, *The Ballot, the Streets, or Both?*, pp. 149-50.
16. Ralph Carter Elwood, "Lenin and *Pravda*, 1912-14," *Slavic Review* 31, no 2 (1972): 355-80, p. 377.
17. Jenness, *Lenin as Election Campaign Manager*, p. 15.
18. "Theses on the Communist Parties and Parliamentarism" (1920).
19. *ibid*.
20. Lenin, *"Left-Wing" Communism*, ch. 7.
21. Rosa Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions* (1906).
22. *ibid*.
23. Quoted in Nimtz, *The Ballot, the Streets, or Both?*, p. 146.
24. Paul Le Blanc, *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party* (Haymarket Books, 2015 [1993]), p. 281.
25. "Theses on the Communist Parties and Parliamentarism" (1920).
26. *ibid*.
27. Rosa Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution* (1900), ch. 5.