The Communist International and the Construction of Factory Cells (Part 2)

In this article we want to examine the construction of factory cells and Bolshevization in the 1920s as it was carried out in the Communist Parties of Great Britain and France. Here will explain the character of this process on a national scale as opposed to the international perspective presented last time.

The Communist Party of Great Britain

The history of the Communist Party of Great Britain is different from that of many other European parties. Although like many of them it was formed out of the fusion in 1921 of sections of older social democratic and revolutionary syndicalist organizations, unlike them this unity was an organic one and the CPGB was almost entirely unaffected by the crippling factionalism so prevalent elsewhere (as we shall see in the case of France). Further, unlike the parties in the other European states, the CPGB started out as as small group without a real mass base; its membership in 1922 was only some 5,000.

As early as its Fourth Congress in 1922 the CPGB had endorsed the organizational resolution of the Comintern Third Congress and it had appointed a commission to prepare for its implementation in Britain so as to reorganize the party along Bolshevik lines.[23] Among the commission's recommendations, endorsed at the CPGB Fifth Congress in October 1922, was the proposal that the basic unit of the party be "local groups" (cells) "of members living near each other, or working in the same place, or attending the same union branch, or taking special interest in some special piece of party activity."[24]

Four two years however this proposal remained on paper, until the Fifth CPGB Congress in Manchester in May 1924, shortly before the Fifth Comintern Congress. In preparing for the Congress of the CPGB the party paper, the Workers' Weekly, wrote:

> *There are many practical difficulties which need to be squarely faced. While experiments in 'factory groups' are to be recommended, there should be no attempts at 'reorganization', to make confusion; and the whole matter will need to be discussed at the Party Congress.*[25]

The debate at the congress itself was divided between supporters of immediate reorganization led by the delegate from the Comintern who called for "immediate

creation of factory groups"[26], and more cautious elements. The final resolution attempted to satisfy both sides on the one hand stating, "at this stage it is necessary to stress the importance of concentrating attention upon the creation of factory groups," while at the same time warning, "the Executive Committee [of the CPGB] is opposed to any attempt to belittle the existing group forms" or to subject the Party to a new radical structural revolution."[27]

Throughout 1925 discussion continued in the Party as to the need for and the character of transforming old organizational forms. Even in the highest party circles there were still misgivings as indicated in the response of Pyatnitski to Harry Pollitt's visit to Moscow in November of that year. The Comintern Orgburo told the CPGB that small size should not prevent the active mplementation of the construction of factory cells.[28]

The final decision was that local party organizations were to first be improved, and then, where possible, they were to be reorganized into factory groups. How this was to work can be seen from the organizational resolution of the Manchester District Congress which enjoined each Party local in the district to consolidate itself and for each to try to sponsor the formation of at least one factory group.[29]

By the time of the First Organizational Conference of the Comintern in March of 1925 the CPGB could boast of fifty factory groups which it labelled "a splendid achievement," and which it insisted was a fitting reply to the "100 and 1 theoretical objections which some comrades raised a year ago."[30] In June the Seventh Congress of the CPGB announced that the number of factory groups had increased to one hundred and that they encompassed ten percent of the party membership. In addition between forty and fifty shop papers were being published regularly.[31] The Congress theses on Bolshevization complained that "there is still considerable hesitation in wholeheartedly adopting the factory form of organization," but it went on to insist: "the chief road towards becoming a real mass party for us lies through the factory, the workshop, the mill, the mine..."[32]

The year 1926 opened with continued progress in the formation of factory cells, resulting in February in the achievment of fully 150 factory groups enrolling twenty percent of the membership and publishing eighty shop papers. This accomplishment was coupled with an increase in membership largely due to the sharpening of class battles particularly among the miners. From 6,000 in April 1926 membership grew to 10,730 in October. On the eve of the British general strike there were 957 comrades in 161 nuclei and by September 1,763 members were enrolled in 316 factory groups.[33]

Ironically it was the general strike itself, the most important post-war class battle of the British and Scottish proletariat, which laid bare the weakness of Bolshevization and the factory groups. For while the strike and communist activity in it strengthened the party numerically it revealed that it was the old branches (the pre-Bolshevization organizational form) which mobilized and directed the work of the party and not the factory groups. As E. H. Brown from the Executive Committee told a CPGB organizational Conference in October:

> *it must be admitted that our factory groups were weak and did not function properly during the General Strike. In some districts the groups stopped functioning altogether.*[34]

In turn the resolution of the Comintern on the Gereral Strike pointed to this fact by remarking that the factory groups continued to exist alongside the old residential organizations rather than replacing them.[35]

The aftermath of the General Strike's defeat was the failure of the Party to retain and assimilate the new members which it had gained from the onset of the strike. By January 1927 membership was down to 9,000 and the number of factory groups had decreased to 149.[36] By this time however the fall of Zinoviev had brought a new orientation to the world communist movement and the concentration on Bolshevization was over. In the CPGB, as elsewhere, this meant a drift back toward residential forms of organization. The Tyneside District Congress in 1927 listed ten factory groups where there had been twenty the year before.

AT the Ninth Congress of the CPGB in October 1927 E. H. Brown reported that membership had declined to 7,500 and they were organized in 227 local groups and only one hundred factory cells.[37] In 1928 membership further declined to 5,556 and continued declining to a low point of 3,500 to 4,000 members in 1929.[38]

The Communist Party of France

If the class struggle itself (in this case the British General Strike) appeared to condemn the concept of factory cells in the form practiced by the Communist parties in the 1920s, the example of the Communist Party of France (PCF) presents us with a more complicated picture. The French party, founded in 1921 by the adhesion of a majority of the old Socialist Party to the Third International, was beset througout the 1920s by bitter factional fighting.

Leadership was originally in the hands of the PCF "right wing" led by the General Secretary, Louis-Oscar Frossard, until his resignation from the party in 1923. Frossard's removal did not end the internal struggle and in July 1924 the PCF representative to the Comintern, Boris Souvarine, was expelled from that body for Trotskyism. In December of the same year the syndicalist opposition in the party, lead by Pierre Monatte and Alfred Rosmer, were also expelled for Trotskyism. In this struggle against the right as well as Trotskyism a new leadership supported by Zinoviev was created, headed by Albert Treint and Suzanne Girault.

Supporters of Bolshevization and the reorganization of the party on the basis of factory cells were active in the PCF as early as 1923 when the Seine Federation Congress succeeded in establishing fourteen nuclei. The factional struggles however served to prevent this example from gaining any national attention.[39]

At the PCF Third Congress in January 1924 the issue of reorganization was raised but again internal dissension and other matters pushed it into the background. The syndicalists, with their reliance on the trade unions attacked the concept of factory cells as an attempt to subordinate the trade unions to the party, which they were.[40] In fact it was not until the National Council meeting at St. Denis in June 1924 that a Central Reorganization Commission was elected and a national plan for reorganization drawn up. The plan called for conferences in the various party federations to popularize reorganization to be followed by a national circular containing detailed instructions on the construction of factory cells. The plan warned: "the reorganization of the party on the basis of factory nuclei must be completed by December 31, 1924."[41]

The circular instructed the federations to liquidate the old party sections (branches) and to reorganize all members regardless of their occupation into factory cells, with the single exception of rural members who could be organized

into village cells. In the drive to complete this assignment before the deadline reorganization proceeded in what would later be admitted to be a bureaucratic manner, whereby the old sections were simply dissolved, often before there were real functioing nuclei to replace them. The nuclei which were established were often factory cells in name only, since the overwhelming majority of their members were not workers. The manner in which reorganization had been conducted served to fuel the factional fires and on the eve of the 1925 Party Congress a platform of the new "right" opposition appeared in the PCF weekly Cahiers du Bolchevisme. Written by Fernand Loriot it stated that the oppostion was not against the factory cell principle but its manner of implementation. At the same time however the platform went on to argue that perhaps another body was needed in addition to the cells, some kind of "deliberative assemblies" which would help to formulate the party line rather than simply implement it.[42]

At the congress itself, held in Clichy, the deadline for completion of reorganization was postponed but the Treint-Girault leadership refused to make a self-criticism. The intervention of the Comintern moreover served to increase the unrest in the party and the boldness of the oppositon. The Comintern in an open letter to the PCF advised it to reconsider the over burdening of factory cells with non-workers and to set up street cells for these members. It also criticised the party's factory cell papers for being all published by the central offices of the party rather than by the factory cells themselves.[43]

By March the PCF Central Committee began to relent. The date for completion of reorganization was again postponed. A self-criticism was made which admitted that cell building in some places had been "defective", that plans had been drawn up "without being developed at the base" and that as a result "certain federations were content to simply replace the title of section with that of cell." Concluding that the result of these errors was the existence of many "inactive cells, without any political sense and not knowing how to work," the circular of self-criticism urged all regions to reform their work and to begin to rectify what had been done previously.[44]

The opposition emboldened the opposition which now began to elaborate on its previous proposal for an additional body outside of the cells. Loriot in a new platform published in May argued that the cells were characterized by a weak internal life, lack of creative initiative and the absence of strong internal education. As a result they might be suited to the conduct of agitation and propaganda in the factories but they were incapable of ensuring the participation of all members in the democratic centralist formulation of party policy. For that he proposed a separate district organization which through monthly meetings would complement the work of the cells and fulfill the need for large bodies in which party policies could be discussed and debated.[45]

Although the Central Committee was quick to charge Loriot with attempting to restore the old social democratic form of organization and to undermine Bolshevik discipline, the opposition was not intimidated. In October 1925 the PCF daily, L'Humanite published still another platform of the oppostion which was accompanied by an unpublished letter of support signed by over 250 leading party members. The letter attacked what it characterized as the "autocratic regime in the party."[46] The platform concluded:

> *None of the proposals of the Central Committe can rescue the factory cells from the harm they suffer; they can only, on the contrary, precipitate their ruin, and consequently the*

that of the party...In the present conjuncture the cells cannot remain the organizational basis of French Communism without accentuating the crisis of recruitment and its influence from which the Party is suffering and without gravely compromising its revolutionary destiny.[47]

The situation in the various districts seemed to confirm the statements of the platform. The Northeast region for instance reported that while in 1925 it had enrolled 3,000 members, after the "mechanical transformation" into cells, by 1926, it was reduced to 1,400.[48]

The rightest offensive, coupled with the crisis in the reorganization work, created a situation in which the left opposition in the Comintern headed by the Italian Communist leader, Amadeo Bordiga, began to develop a following in France. The leftists went much further than the Loriot group in their rejection of the Bolshevization campaign as it was being conducted by the PCF. In fact the rejected the entire premise that organizational measures were the order of the day or an adequate test of determining the communist character of a party. As one of the manifestoes of the French left explained it, not factory cells but "the foresight and strength of its means of activity and of struggle, and its fidelity to the principles of Marxism make a revolutionary party."[49]

On the eve of the Communist Party of France's Fifth Congress the situation was as follows. The Treint-Girault leadership had lost the faith of a large proportion of the membership; moreover its close ties with the Zinoviev leadership was beginning to lose it favor in Moscow. The right opposition's strong position had been steadily eroding due to a series of purges and resignations, notably that of Fernand Loriot himself. The left opposition on the contrary could command no national presence.

Therefore when the Congress opened at Lille in June 1926 the PCF was ready, with Comintern help, to create a new national leadership and a new style of work. For their responsibility in the previous work of the party Treint and Girault were removed from the Politbureau of the Central Committee. A new organizational resolution was adopted which called for a complete reform of organizational practice and a renewed effort to breath life into the already existing cells. In spite of this effort the flow of members out of the cells continued, even in the Paris region which had been one of the most completely reorganized.[50]

It perhaps could be debated the degree to which this was an actual reversal of the reorganization of the Party and the degree to which it was nothing more than a recognition that nothing had been actually accomplished to begin with. In any case the years 1925-29 witnessed a sharp decline in membership from 83,326 in 1925 to 65,230 in 1926 to 56,010 in 1927 and then to 52,526 in 1928. In 1929 the PCF claimed only 46,000 members.[51] The organizational picture which this decline presents can be seen in the figures from the region of Nancy where in 1926 there had been 41 factory cells, seven street cells and 31 local organizations. In March 1927 the same region claimed only two factory cells and 25 local branches.[52]

By 1928 the situation was even more unfavorable as an organizational conference of the PCF reported:

The factory groups are numerically weak and their activity is insignificant, whereas the street groups, which in most cases strangely enough resemble the old teritorial organizations,

are numerically increasing and have a tendency to play a greater part than the factory groups.[53]

In March of 1928 the PCF could claim only 1,142 local organizations of which only 358 (23.5%) were factory nuclei.[54]

In the third and last article in this series we will examine the reorganization of the Communist Party of the United States with regard to factory cells and summarise the lessons of the experience of communist factory cell work for our own efforts to build a genuine communist party in the United States.

Footnotes to The Communist International and the Construction of Factory Cells (Parts 1 & 2):

[1] *Principles of Party Organization*, (Calcutta, 1975).

[2] *Fourth Congress of the Communist International* (London, n.d.), 118-9.

[3] "On Factory Nuclei," in Unite!, paper of the MLOC (August 1975).

[4] E.H. Carr, *Socialism in One Country* (Baltimore, 1964), III, 936.

[5] *Fifth Congress of the Communist International* (London, n.d.), 10-43.

[6] Ibid., p. 266.

[7] Ibid.

[8] *International Press Correspondence (hereafter Inprecorr)* V (Feb. 28, 1924).

[9] Ibid., V (March 30, 1925)315-16.

[10] Ibid., 319-20; V (March 31, 1925) 321-22.

[11] Ibid., V (March 30, 1925) 314.

[12] Ibid., V (April 6, 1925) 357-58.

[13] Ibid., V (June 9, 1925) 650.

[14] Carr, op. cit., p. 304.

[15] *Inprecorr*, V (June 4, 1925) 621.

[16] Ibid., VI (April 16, 1926) 453.

[17] Ibid., p. 456.

[18] Ibid., VI (March 17, 1926) 297.

[19] Ibid., pps. 297-98.

[20] *The Communist International Between the Fifth and Sixth World Congresses, 1924-1928*, (London, 1928), 15.

[21] *Inprecorr*, IX (August 30, 1929).

[22] Ibid., p. 931.

[23] L.J. Macfarlane, *The British Communist Party*, (London, 1966), 76.

[24] Ibid., p. 80.

[25] *Workers' Weekly (hereafter WW), April 25, 1924.*

[26] *Communist Review*, V (June 1924) p. 55.

[27] WW, May 30, 1924.

[28] *Inprecorr*, v (Feb. 5, 1925) 136-8.

[29] WW, Feb. 13, 1925.

[30] Ibid., March 6, 1925.

[31]James Klugmann, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain*, (London, 1969) II, 339.

[32]Ibid., p. 338.

[33]*The Communist International Between the Fifth and Sixth Congresses*, (London, 1928), 131.

[34]Osip Pyatnitski, *The Organization of a World Party* (London, 1928) 44.

[35]*Communist Review*, VII (Oct. 1926) 257-58.

[36]*The Communist International Between the Fifth and Sixth Congresses*, 131.

[37]WW, Oct. 14, 1927.

[38]*Inprecorr*, IX (Aug. 30, 1929) 936.

[39]*Inprecorr*, V (March 30, 1925) 315.

[40]Jedermann, *La "Bolchevisation" du Parti Communiste Francais* (Paris 1971) 54.

[41]Ibid., p. 38.

[42]*Cahiers du Bolchevisme (hereafter CB)*, Jan. 9, 1924.

[43]*Inprecorr, V (Feb. 5, 1925) 138-9.*

[44]CB, March 15, 1925.

[45]CB, May 1, 1925.

[46]Carr, op. cit., p. 371.

[47]CB, May 22, 1926.

[48]Ibid., Feb. 11, 1926.

[49]Ibid., June 1, 1926.

[50]Pyatnitski, op. cit., 44-45.

[51]*Inprecorr*, IX (Aug. 30, 1929) 936.

[52]*The Communist International Between the Fifth and Sixth Congresses*, 15.

[53]Ibid.

[54]Jedermann, op. cit., p. 56.

The Communist International on Organization--A Bibliography

General Works

Carr, E. H. *A History of Soviet Russia*. This multi-volume series, in particular, *Socialism in One Country*, volume three, is the best secondary work on the history and structure of the Communist International between its founding and the late 1920s. It is also good on the history of many of the Communist Parties.

Minutes of the Congresses and Plenums of the Communist International. Available in English are many abridged minutes of the Comintern sessions. See in particular minutes of the Fourth and Fifth Congresses and of the Fifth Plenum.

Bolshevizing the Communist International and *The Communist International Between the Fifth and Sixth World Congresses* are both documents published by the Comintern between congresses summarizing the work of the CI itself and the various parties. They are invaluable for the statistics and references they contain.

The Young Communist International. The international of Young Communist Leagues published a number of valuable documents in English on its work including *Resolutions and Theses Adopted at the Third Congress of the Young Communist International, Resolutions and Theses Adopted at the Fourth Congress of the Communist Youth International*, and *The Young Communist International Between the Fourth and Fifth Congresses*.

Lazitch, Branko and Drachkovitch, Milorad M. *Biographical Dictionary of the Comintern*. (Stanford, 1973). An invaluable collection of biographies of the leaders of the world communist movement. It includes an index of pseudonyms.

Works on Organization

Gyptner, Richard. *From Isolation to the Masses*. Berlin, 1923. Written by the Organizational Secretary of the Young Communist International, this was a manual on factory organization for the Young Communist Leagues.

Principles of Party Organization. (Calcutta, 1975). This contains the resolution on organization adopted by the Third Comintern Congress.

How To Organize the Communist Party. London n.d. This is a transcript of the minutes and resolutions of the Organizational Commission of the Fifth Congress of the Comintern.

The Organization of A World Party. Osip Pyatnitski (London, 1928). A critical review of Bolshevization by the head of the Comintern Orgburo.

The Bolshevization of the Communist Parties of the Capitalist Countries by Eradicating Social-Democratic Traditions. Osip Pyatnitski. (New York, 1933). A 1931 lecture on the failure of Bolshevization in the Communist Parties of western Europe and the experience of the Bolshevik Party as a contrast with them.

Periodical Literature

International Press Correspondence, also known as *Inprecorr*. This was the weekly organ of the Communist International, begun in 1919. It carried reports and minutes from all major Comintern functions. Of particular interest here are:

Resolution on the Reorganization of the Party on the Basis of Factory Nuclei, in the August 29, 1924 issue.

Issues of February 5, March 30, March 31, April 6, and June 9, 1925 which contain the minutes and resolutions of the First Organizational Conference of the Comintern.

Issue of August 6, 1925 entitled *Every Work Place Our Stronghold!*, containing materials on various aspects of the organizational problem.

Issue of December 21, 1925 on Communist Fraction work.

Issues of January 13, April 16, April 26, and May 5, 1926 containing resolutions and minutes of the Second Organizational Conference of the Comintern.

For those interested in the study of the Communist Party of Great Britain the key periodicals are: *Communist Review*, the monthly theoretical journal of the CPGB, and *The Workers' Weekly*, which was published from 1923 to 1927 when it was replaced by the *Workers life*.

For those interested in doing work on the Communist Party of France the key periodicals are *Cahiers du Bolchevisme*, monthly theoretical journal, and *L' Humanite*, the PCF daily.

Of course there are numerous minor works which we have not included here. And we have also left aside works dealing with the history and organizational practice of the Communist Party of the United States which will appear in the next issue. Those interested in more bibliographical information should write to the *Theoretical Review*.