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INTRODUCTION

By Doug Lorimer

I. A POPULAR EXPOSITION OF BOLSHEVIK STRATEGY AND TACTICS

This work was written by Vladimir Ilyich Lenin in April 1920 and published in booklet form in Russian in June 1920, and in English, French and German the following month. The manuscript of the booklet was entitled: "An Attempt to Conduct a Popular Discussion on Marxist Strategy and Tactics". Copies of it were given to each delegate attending the 2nd Congress of the Communist International held in Petrograd (St. Petersburg) and Moscow between July 19 and August 7, 1920.

In the opening paragraphs of the booklet, Lenin wrote that "it might have seemed that the enormous difference between backward Russia and the advanced countries of Western Europe would lead to the proletarian revolution in the latter countries bearing very little resemblance to ours". However, the experience of the West European workers' movement in the two years after the Russian proletariat had won political power on November 7, 1917 (October 25 in the prerevolutionary Russian calendar) had shown, "very definitely that certain fundamental features of our revolution have a significance that is not local, or peculiarly national, or Russian alone, but international". While there would inevitably be concrete differences, and:

It would also be erroneous to lose sight of the fact that, soon after the victory of the proletarian revolution in at least one of the advanced countries, a sharp change will probably come about: Russia will cease to be the model and will once again become a backward country (in the "soviet" and the socialist sense).

At the present moment in history, however, it is the Russian model that reveals to *all* countries something — and something highly significant — of their near and inevitable future. Advanced workers in all lands have long realised this; more than not, they have grasped it.

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Lenin went on to point out that the politically advanced workers in other countries had realised "that the Bolsheviks could not have retained power for two and a half months, let alone two and a half years, without the most rigorous and truly iron discipline in our party, or without the fullest and unreserved support from the entire mass of the working class, that is, from all thinking, honest, devoted and influential elements within it, capable of leading the backward strata or carrying the latter along with them". But many foreign communists, particularly in Western Europe, had little idea *how* the Bolsheviks had built up a centralised, disciplined party of the working-class vanguard and had won the support of the big majority of Russian workers.

"As a current of political thought and as a political party", Lenin wrote, "Bolshevism has existed since 1903. Only the history of Bolshevism during the *entire* period of its existence can satisfactorily explain why it has been able to build up and maintain, under the most difficult conditions, the iron discipline needed for the victory of the proletariat". "*Left-Wing*" Communism — *An Infantile Disorder* was aimed at providing foreign communists with a summary of the Bolsheviks' strategy and tactics and, in the process, countering the views of ultraleft-sectarian currents that were developing in the communist movement at the time, particularly in Germany, Britain and the Netherlands.

II. THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF BOLSHEVISM

Bolshevism had originated out of an ideological struggle within the ranks of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party in 1899-1902 between the adherents of revolutionary Marxism, who were grouped around the journal *Iskra* (the Spark) and an opportunist current known as "Economism", which argued that Russian socialists should confine their activities to helping to promote the spontaneous struggles of the mass of workers — which at that time were limited to struggles over economic conditions — and leave the leadership of the political struggle for democracy in tsarist Russia to the liberal bourgeois opposition.

At the 2nd Congress of the RSDLP, held in London in August 1903, the Iskristis split, with the majority, led by Lenin, supporting the principles and tactics of the old *Iskra*, and the minority, led by Julius Martov, joining forces with the Economists, led by Aleksandr Martynov. Hence the names Bolsheviks and Mensheviks (from the Russian words for majority and minority) arose.

At the end of the congress, the majority elected a new editorial board for *Iskra* (which it was agreed would be the official organ of the party), consisting of Martov, Lenin and Georgy Plekhanov (the acknowledged founder of the Russian Marxist

movement and at that time a supporter of the majority). This replaced the previously self-appointed editorial group of Pavel Akselrod, Lenin, Martov, Plekhanov, Aleksandr Potresov and Vera Zasulich. However, Martov boycotted the new editorial board and pressured Plekhanov into agreeing to defy the congress decision by readmitting the other three back onto the editorial board. When a number of adherents of the Bolsheviks on the party's Central Committee defected to the Mensheviks and refused to condemn Plekhanov and Martov's defiance of the congress decision, Lenin resigned from the editorial board of *Iskra* and set up a new paper, *Vperyod* (Forward), which became the organ of a Bolshevik faction.

In 1904 the dispute between the Bolshevik and Menshevik factions was mainly over organisational questions, over whether the leading bodies of the RSDLP should function in accordance with the rules adopted by the 2nd party congress, or whether these should operate as self-selected cliques, on the basis of personal friendships.

The differences between the two trends took final shape in 1905 with the Mensheviks arguing for socialists to ally themselves with the liberal bourgeoisie and to limit the workers' revolutionary movement to placing the liberals in power. The Bolsheviks, by contrast, argued that the liberal bourgeoisie would betray the democratic interests of the people. The Russian working class, in their view, should seek to win the leadership of the peasant masses to carry the anti-tsarist, anti-landlord democratic revolution through to a revolutionary seizure of power by the working class and the peasantry. Such a victory would open the road to an alliance between the workers and the semi-proletarian section of the peasantry to carry out the socialist revolution against capitalism.

The main practical divergence between the two trends in 1905 was over the fact that the Bolsheviks stood for a boycott by the working class of the sham, advisory parliament (Duma) conceded by the tsarist regime in an effort to defuse the mass revolutionary-democratic movement that had erupted in 1905, while the Mensheviks favoured participation in the elections for this assembly.

In the years of reaction after the 1905-06 revolutionary upsurge, the differences between the factions deepened, with the Mensheviks favouring electoral alliances with the liberal bourgeois Constitutional Democratic Party (Kadets) while the Bolsheviks favoured electoral alliances with the peasant-based, petty-bourgeois revolutionary-democratic Trudoviks and the Socialist-Revolutionary Party.

The Bolsheviks also suffered a split of their own when a minority within their ranks advocated abstention from participation in elections to the limited parliament conceded by the tsarist regime.

In 1912, following the decision of the majority of Mensheviks to confine themselves to activities that were legally sanctioned by the tsarist regime (which banned the existence of any workers' organisations that engaged in political activity), the Bolsheviks constituted themselves as a separate party, taking the name Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party exclusively for themselves.

In April 1917, when Lenin returned from exile to Russia, he proposed that the Bolsheviks rename themselves the Communist Party, reviving the name used by the first Marxist organisation, the Communist League of 1847-52. The name "Social-Democrat", which had been adopted by Marxists in most European countries in the 1880s and 1890s, Lenin argued, had been discredited by the betrayal during World War I by the leaders of the Second International (founded in Paris in 1889) of the revolutionary class-struggle principles of Marxism in favour of opportunist, class-collaborationist policies (supporting the imperialist war aims of the governments of their countries, participation in bourgeois cabinets).

At its 7th congress in March 1918, the new name Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) was adopted. A year later, in March 1919, the Russian Communists took the initiative to launch a new international association of Marxist parties, the Third, or Communist, International (also known as the Comintern).

III. PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY AND THE PROLETARIAN REVOLUTION

The founding congress of the Comintern adopted documents that noted that the imperialist world war (1914-18) had confirmed that the capitalist social order had become a fetter on the development of human culture and a new epoch had begun, marked by a general crisis between capitalist relations of production and objectively socialised productive forces, which could only be overcome through proletarian-socialist revolutions in the advanced capitalist countries.

In this context, the reformist orientation of the opportunist leaders of the social-democratic parties and the trade unions played a counterrevolutionary role by seeking to aid the capitalist rulers restabilise their system and to suppress the developing potentially revolutionary movements of the workers against the economic chaos created by the war. To counter the influence of the opportunist labour leaders, a sharp ideological, political and organisational distinction had to be drawn between the revolutionary and reformist currents in the working-class movement, by forging new working-class parties on the basis of a clear revolutionary program.

The main danger confronting such a perspective was the confusion and disorientation introduced among revolutionary-minded workers by those currents

that espoused support for proletarian revolutions but refused to break from the reformist practices of the old social-democratic parties. These "centrist" currents, the Bolsheviks warned, could be expected at critical moments in the class struggle to make treacherous compromises with the avowed reformists, as they had done in Germany in January-February 1919 when the centrist Independent Social-Democratic Party (USPD) led by Karl Kautsky had supported the use by the Social-Democratic Party (SPD) government of Friedrich Ebert, Philip Scheidemann and Gustav Noske of army units commanded by reactionary officers to crush a general strike by the workers of Berlin, massacring an estimated 3000 workers, including the leaders of the new founded Communist Party of Germany, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. Already in December 1918, Kautsky had given advance justification for the USPD's treachery when he declared in its paper *Die Freiheit* that: "Law and order are preconditions to accomplishing socialism and the social revolution."¹¹

Both the reformists and the centrists were seeking to politically confuse the working-class vanguard by counterposing the defence of "democracy in general" (which they identified with the bourgeois parliamentary system of representation based on universal suffrage by atomised voters) against "dictatorship in general" (under which they included both the old autocratic regimes of prewar Europe and the revolutionary proletarian state power of the elected councils of workers', soldiers' and peasants' delegates in Soviet Russia). In doing so, they obscured the fact that all forms of state power — including the parliamentary form — were *class* dictatorships, i.e., were based upon the naked use of armed force, unrestricted by any laws, by one class (or a temporary alliance of classes) to suppress the resistance to its rule by other classes. Whenever the capitalists felt their rule was threatened by a powerful movement of resistance by the working-class majority, they would abandon the charade of parliamentary elections and the formal equalities of their legal system and rely directly upon military-police repression to crush such resistance.

Parliamentary democracy, the founding congress of the Comintern explained in a resolution on "Bourgeois Democracy and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat", was a sham democracy which excluded the working-class majority from any real say in the exercise of state power. It reaffirmed "the idea formulated with the greatest scientific precision by Marx and Engels, namely, that the most democratic bourgeois republic is no more than a machine for the suppression of the working class by the bourgeoisie, for the suppression of the working people by a handful of capitalists"¹² and that, if the working-class was to conquer political power, it would have to destroy this state machine, including its parliamentary system.

The proletarian dictatorship, it stated, "is similar to the dictatorship of other classes in that it arises out of the need, as every dictatorship does, to forcibly suppress the resistance of the class that is losing its political sway", adding:

The fundamental distinction between the dictatorship of the proletariat and the dictatorship of other classes — landlord dictatorship in the Middle Ages and bourgeois dictatorship in all the civilised capitalist countries — consists in the fact that the dictatorship of the landowners and bourgeoisie was the forcible suppression of the resistance offered by the vast majority of the population, namely, the working people. In contrast, proletarian dictatorship is the forcible suppression of the resistance of the exploiters, i.e., an insignificant minority of the population, the landowners and capitalists.

It follows that a proletarian dictatorship must inevitably entail not only a change in democratic forms and institutions, general speaking, but precisely such a change as provides an unparalleled extension of the actual enjoyment of democracy by those oppressed by capitalism — the toiling classes.³

The Comintern resolution argued that Marxists should fight to replace the parliamentary system, which excluded the working people from real participation in the exercise of state power and placed this power in the hands of a military-bureaucratic machine made up of unelected, privileged officials tied to the propertied classes, with soviet-type organs of state power, the substance of which was that the "permanent and only foundation of state power ... is the mass-scale organisation of the classes oppressed by capitalism, the workers and the semi-proletarians (peasants who do not exploit the labour of others and regularly resort to the sale of at least a part of their own labour-power)".⁴

Already, at the time of the founding congress of the Comintern, soviet-type councils of workers' and soldiers' delegates had arisen in Germany during the mass revolt in November 1918 against continuation of the imperialist war. The crucial task of Marxists was to weld the working-class vanguard, the politically advanced workers, into a Bolshevik-type party to win over and lead the working-class majority to take all political power into the hands of these soviet-type bodies and destroy the bourgeois state machine that the reformists and centrists were defending and using to resist the victory of the proletarian revolution.

Within the ranks of those who supported such a perspective, the biggest problem was their inexperience and impatience. This had already led to one costly defeat — in Berlin in January-February 1919 — when the newly founded Communist Party of Germany (KPD) had been drawn into leading a poorly organised attempt at an insurrectionary seizure of power by the militant sections of the Berlin working class.

IV. THE GERMAN REVOLUTION AND THE GERMAN COMMUNISTS

On October 30, 1918, a spontaneous revolutionary movement, similar to that in Russia in February 1917, had broken out in war-exhausted Germany. Sailors in the German North Sea fleet mutinied and by November 8 the revolt had spread across Germany, with armed workers and soldiers forming elected councils of delegates along similar lines to the Russian soviets of workers' and soldiers' deputies, which took *de facto* control in all the major cities. The following day, Imperial Chancellor Max von Baden announced that Kaiser Wilhelm II had abdicated and appointed as chancellor (prime minister) Friedrich Ebert, the leader of the avowedly pro-war, reformist Social-Democratic Party (SPD).

On November 10 the leaders of the SPD and the centrist Independent Social-Democratic Party (USPD), led by Karl Kautsky, agreed to form a six-member cabinet, which they named the "Council of People's Representatives" in imitation of the Russian "Council of People's Commissars", the name of the cabinet elected by the 2nd Congress of Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies on the day after the Bolshevik insurrection on November 7, 1917. However, the German Council of People's Representatives, while nominally acknowledging that it was controlled by the USPD dominated Executive Committee elected by the Berlin Workers' and Soldiers' Council, acted to preserve the old state machine and the wartime coalition that the SPD had established with the right-wing bourgeois parties. The High Command of the Imperial German Army agreed to acknowledge the authority of the new "socialist" government, while the Ebert government confirmed the authority of the military commanders of the old regime.

The German working people thus confronted the same alternative paths that the Russian workers and peasants had faced in 1917: either to advance toward a proletarian democracy by transferring all power to the armed workers and soldiers and their elected councils, or to suffer a bloody defeat at the hands of reactionary army officers operating under the cover of a bourgeois parliamentary republic headed by sham socialists.

The revolutionary Marxists in Germany, however, were in no position — as the Bolsheviks had been at the beginning of 1917 in Russia — to provide an effective, disciplined alternative revolutionary leadership to the reformists and centrists. Falsely believing that the opportunist leaders of the SPD would be simply swept aside by a spontaneous revolutionary movement of the masses, Rosa Luxemburg and her allies in the revolutionary left-wing of the SPD had failed to build a coherent, centralised

organisation of tested Marxist cadres in the years before World War I. They had confined themselves to a purely ideological battle against the reformists and centrists within the SPD. Consequently, when a split occurred in the SPD in January 1917, the centrists were able to take the majority of the rapidly radicalising working-class base of the SPD with them into the USPD, and the revolutionary Marxists, who were known as the Internationale Group, were forced to work as an informally organised public faction within the USPD.

On November 11, 1918, in the midst of the revolutionary uprising of the armed workers and soldiers against the imperial authorities, the Internationale Group finally constituted itself as a distinct membership organisation and changed its name to the Spartacus League. However, it had only 50 adherents in Berlin. Despite this numerical weakness, the reputation of its leaders — Luxemburg and Liebknecht — enabled the Spartacists to call sizable mobilisations. Thus on December 8, 1918, they called a demonstration to demand that the Ebert government be ousted, all officers be disarmed, a workers' militia be formed and the workers' and soldiers' councils take all power into their hands. The demonstration was attended by 150,000 armed workers and soldiers. This result, however, reinforced the Spartacists' illusions that the revolutionary seizure of power could be achieved by a semi-spontaneous movement through a general strike and mass demonstrations, rather than by a centralised, disciplined armed insurrection consciously supported by the majority of working people headed by a well-trusted party of professionally trained propagandists, agitators and organisers.

It was not until December 29 that the Spartacus League convened a national conference of its supporters and decided to leave the USPD and constitute itself as a new, separate party — the Communist Party of Germany (KPD). During the course of the conference the Spartacists fused with a number of other revolutionary groups, giving the new party a membership of several thousands throughout Germany. But this was a party that lacked political homogeneity and a battle-tested cadre.

Since December 8 the Spartacists had repeatedly made the call, "Down with the government". According to Spartacist leader Klara Zetkin, Luxemburg saw this call as a "propaganda slogan to rally the revolutionary proletariat rather than a tangible object of revolutionary action".⁵ However, large numbers of revolutionary-minded workers interpreted it as an immediate call for an armed uprising, as did the majority of the new members of the KPD. As the Bolshevik representative at the congress, Karl Radek, observed in a report he sent back to Moscow: "The youth in the congress were ready to storm the heavens. They thought that Karl [Liebknecht] and Rosa [Luxemburg] were applying brakes to the movement, and that victory was very close

at hand ... Yet the immaturity and inexperience of the German party were shown very clearly there. Its ties to the masses were very weak."⁶

The most controversial question at the KPD's founding congress was over what orientation the party should have to the elections for a constituent (national) assembly called by the Ebert government for January 19, 1919. Previously, Luxemburg had been in favour of calling for a boycott of these parliamentary elections, but once the national congress of workers and soldiers' councils (held December 16-21) had voted overwhelmingly to back them, she argued that the revolutionists should drop their call for a boycott. Instead, she argued that the KPD had to use the "platform provided by this counterrevolutionary parliament, the election campaign" to "educate, unite, and mobilise the revolutionary masses" to "establish a proletarian dictatorship".⁷ However, as Radek observed, Liebknecht wavered on the issue and most of the new party members were against participation in the elections:

Liebknecht said: "When I wake up in the morning, I am against taking part in the constituent assembly elections, but by evening I am in favour of it" ... But the party youth were decidedly against it. "We will break it up with machine guns."⁸

The national assembly elections were held on schedule on January 19, with 85% of the electorate voting — a higher turnout than in prewar national elections. The SPD gained 37.8% of the vote, the USPD gained only 7.8%, with the majority of votes going to right-wing bourgeois parties. This experience did not resolve the differences within the KPD.

At its next congress in October 1919, after the revolutionary movement had ebbed following the severe blow it had suffered in January-February 1919, by a narrow majority the position of boycotting parliamentary elections was rejected. Half of the party's membership, including all but a few dozen in Berlin, left the KPD and in April 1920 formed a rival organisation, the Communist Workers Party of Germany (KAPD), which affirmed non-participation in parliamentary elections on principle. The KAPD also reaffirmed the KPD founding congress's position of refusal to work in the existing SPD-led trade unions.

The ultraleft-sectarian positions adopted by the KPD's founding congress, and enshrined as principles by the KAPD, were held in other newly-formed parties adhering to the Comintern. They were subsequently taken up in Lenin's booklet and debated at the 2nd Comintern congress, which adopted a resolution presenting the revolutionary Marxist approach to parliament and parliamentary elections (see addendum 1).

V. MARXISM AND THE WORKING-CLASS VANGUARD

In his polemic against the "left" communists, Lenin located their doctrinaire-sectarian errors in a failure to understand the difference between the methods required to win to the communist movement the class-conscious section of the working class — the "proletariat's vanguard" — and the methods required to educate, organise and mobilise for the proletarian revolution the broad masses of the working people. In doing so, he sought to convey the lessons of the Bolsheviks' experience in Russia.

This distinction had been fundamental to Lenin's whole perspective for building a revolutionary Marxist party in Russia, and had been first articulated in his debate with the opportunist Economist trend that had come to dominate the adherents of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party in the late 1890s.

In an article written in 1899 — "A Retrograde Trend in Russian Social-Democracy" — Lenin explained the origins of the Economist deviation as arising out the turn toward mass agitation after 1894 by the Russian Marxist study circles (which consisted largely of intellectuals and students drawn from aristocratic and bourgeois social backgrounds):

... the spread of their agitation brought the Social-Democrats into contact with the lower, less developed strata of the proletariat; to attract these strata it was necessary for the agitator to be able to adapt himself to the lowest level of understanding, he was taught to put the "demands and interests of the given moment" in the foreground and to push back the broad ideals of socialism and the political struggle [for democracy]. The fragmentary, amateur nature of Social-Democratic work, the extremely weak connections between the study circles in the different cities, between the Russian Social-Democrats and their comrades abroad who possessed a profounder knowledge and a richer revolutionary experience, as well as a wider political horizon, naturally led to a gross exaggeration of this (*absolutely essential*) aspect of Social-Democratic activity, which could bring some individuals to lose sight of the other aspects, especially since with every reverse [i.e., arrests by the tsarist secret police — DL] the most developed workers and intellectuals were wrenched from the ranks of the struggling army, so that sound revolutionary traditions and continuity could not as yet be evolved. It is in this extreme exaggeration of one aspect of Social-Democratic work that we see the chief cause of the sad retreat from the ideals of Russian Social-Democracy [i.e., the Economist deviation — DL].⁹

The Economist trend exaggerated agitation around and involvement in the spontaneous concerns and struggles of the broad mass of workers — which, at that

time, were limited to economic struggles with individual employers for immediate improvements of wages and working conditions — into a party-building theory. Their initial position was set out in a manifesto, the *Credo Program* of 1899, which stated:

For the Russian Marxist there is only one course: participation in, that is, assistance to, the economic struggle of the proletariat, and participation in liberal opposition activity.¹⁰

The Economists argued that the Marxists should push forward the workers' spontaneous economic struggles and only engage in the political struggle against the autocratic government by supporting the liberal bourgeois intelligentsia's legal opposition activities. Later, when the broad mass of workers began to spontaneously raise demands for the tsarist government to adopt labour legislation, the Economist trend, continuing its opportunistic course of tail-ending the spontaneous working-class movement, declared that the role of the Marxists was to "lend the economic struggle a political character".

In opposition to the Economist trend, Lenin argued in the journal *Iskra* and in his 1902 booklet *What Is To Be Done?* that the economic struggle *already* had a political character, the character of trade union politics (i.e., *reformist-bourgeois* politics), and that the task of Marxists was to bring *revolutionary proletarian* politics into the economic struggle and every other form of mass struggle.

Lenin's general point was that these Economist positions were rooted in an underestimation of the role of the ideological (conscious) element in building the socialist movement. Inevitably, they minimised the importance of proletarian ideology, of revolutionary-socialist theory, while Lenin emphasised that "Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement".¹¹

Downplaying revolutionary theory inevitably meant adopting a position that the spontaneous workers' movement could, by itself, develop a proletarian class-consciousness. Consequently, the socialists should, according to the Economists, merely assist the workers' struggles in their spontaneous development. Lenin dubbed this position "tailist" and insisted that the task of Marxists was to bring revolutionary class-consciousness to the working-class movement "from without", to "divert" that movement from its "spontaneous trade unionist striving to come under the wing of the bourgeoisie".¹² All efforts to belittle this task, to narrow the activities of Marxists to simply generalising the spontaneous struggles of the workers, amounted, according to Lenin, to a surrender of socialism to bourgeois ideology.

Lenin pointed out that, historically, socialist theory was not developed by workers, but by aristocratic and bourgeois intellectuals in the 16th, 17th, 18th and early 19th

centuries:

At first socialism and the working-class movement existed separately in all European countries. The workers struggled against capitalism, they organised strikes and unions, while the socialists stood aside from the working-class movement, formulating doctrines criticising the contemporary capitalist bourgeois system of society and demanding its replacement by another system, the higher socialist system. The separation of the working-class movement and socialism gave rise to weakness and underdevelopment in each: the theories of the socialists, unfused with the workers' struggle, remained nothing more than utopias, good wishes that had no effect on real life; the working-class movement remained petty, fragmented, and did not acquire political significance, it was not enlightened by the advanced science of its time. For this reason we see in all European countries a constantly growing urge to *fuse* socialism with the working-class movement ... When this fusion takes place the class struggle of the workers becomes *the conscious struggle of the proletariat* to emancipate itself from exploitation by the propertied classes, it is evolved into a higher form of the socialist workers' movement — *the independent working-class [Marxist] party*. By directing socialism towards a fusion with the working-class movement, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels did their greatest service: they created a revolutionary theory that explained the necessity for this fusion and gave socialists the task of organising the class struggle of the proletariat.¹³

Pre-Marxist socialism (utopian socialism) had inevitably remained mere dreams because it did not understand that socialism as a material reality could only be the result of the successful fusion of socialist theory with the working-class movement, a fusion that would culminate in the revolutionary victory of the working class over the capitalist exploiters. The development of scientific socialism (Marxism) pointed out the real historical relationship between socialist theory and the working-class movement. The development of scientific socialism was, in this sense, the first step and indispensable precondition for the fusion of socialist theory and the working-class movement, a fusion embodied in the Marxist vanguard party.

But how was this "fusion" to be accomplished? Did this mean that the Marxist intellectuals should seek to build such a party by orienting in an undifferentiated way to the entire mass of the working class? That was precisely the course of action followed by the Economists. By contrast, Lenin argued that the Marxist intellectuals had to understand that the working class was not a homogeneous undifferentiated mass, but was stratified in its conditions of life and therefore in its potential to be won to Marxist revolutionary politics:

The history of the working-class movement in all countries shows that the better-

situated strata of the working class respond to the ideas of socialism more rapidly and more easily. From among these come, in the main, the advanced workers that every working-class movement brings to the fore, those who can win the confidence of the labouring masses, who devote themselves entirely to the education and organisation of the proletariat, who accept socialism consciously, and who even elaborate independent socialist theories. Every viable working-class movement has brought to the fore such working-class leaders, its own Proudhons, Valliants, Weitlings and Bebel's ... who, despite their wretched living conditions, despite the stultifying penal servitude of factory labour, possess so much character and willpower that they study, study, study, and turn themselves into conscious Social-Democrats [i.e., socialists] — "the working-class intelligentsia" ...

After the numerically small stratum of advanced workers comes the broad stratum of average workers. These workers, too, strive ardently for socialism, participate in workers' study circles, read socialist newspapers and books, participate in agitation, and differ from the preceding stratum only in that they cannot become fully independent leaders of the [socialist] workers' movement ... Such workers, [are] absorbed by *local* practical work and [are] interested mainly in the events of the working-class movement and the immediate problems of agitation ...

Lastly, behind the stratum of average workers comes the mass that constitutes the lower strata of the proletariat. It is quite possible that a socialist newspaper will be completely or well-nigh incomprehensible to them ...¹⁴

Lenin's approach was devoid of romanticism about workers' political understanding (for Lenin, the mass of workers will not even be able understand a socialist newspaper!) or demagoguery about the need for socialists to become "just like workers" before they could carry out socialist political work in the working-class movement. Nor did he adopt the "opinion poll" approach of bourgeois sociology to distinguish these three strata within the working class, i.e., determining the average political consciousness of the working class at any given time, and then defining the "advanced workers" as those who have a higher-than-average consciousness and the backward workers as those with a lower-than-average one.

Instead, Lenin's approach was a strictly materialist, i.e., scientific, one. He defined the advanced workers relative to a stable criterion (socialist theory), and not relative to a variable criterion (to the average level of consciousness at any given time in any given country). Lenin insisted upon this frame of reference for all countries at all times, as he indicated by writing about "the advanced workers that every working-class movement brings to the fore".

Further, by including as examples of such advanced workers Pierre Proudhon, Eugene Valliant, and Wilhelm Weitling — none of whom were Marxian socialists — Lenin made it clear that by "accept socialism consciously" he did not mean only those workers were "advanced" who accepted Marxian socialism (scientific revolutionary socialism) as their theoretical guide.

Lenin's concern was how to fuse those who understood Marxist revolutionary theory with the practical working-class movement. He therefore singled out for special attention those workers who could play an *advanced role* in this process. To play this role, workers had to have a particular relation to socialist theory; they must, in Lenin's words, "accept socialism consciously". It is precisely these workers that Marxists had to orient themselves toward, since it was through these workers that Marxist ideas could be carried into the spontaneous working-class movement and this movement won to a revolutionary-socialist perspective. As he explained:

In no political or social movement, in no country has there ever been, or could there ever have been, any other relation between the mass of the given class or people and its numerically few educated representatives than the following: everywhere and at all times the leaders of a certain class have always been its advanced, most cultivated representatives.¹⁵

Lenin did not ignore the fact that a given workers' movement might have very few advanced workers in a particular period, or that other, different, levels of consciousness in the working class should be ignored by Marxists. He pointed out that socialist work directed toward the lower, less developed strata of the proletariat was "*absolutely essential*", but required "different forms of agitation and propaganda" from those required to win the advanced strata — "pamphlets written in more popular language, oral agitation, and chiefly — leaflets on local events".¹⁶

But while Lenin didn't reduce socialist activity solely to a focus on the advanced workers, he did argue that to *fuse socialism with the working-class movement*, i.e., to build a socialist workers' party, Marxists had to devote special attention to the more advanced strata. In *What Is To Be Done?* Lenin wrote:

... our very first and most pressing duty is to help train working-class revolutionaries who will be on the same level *in regard to Party activity* as the revolutionaries from amongst the intellectuals ... Attention, therefore must be devoted *principally* to raising the workers to the level of revolutionaries; it is not at all our task *to descend* to the level of the "working masses" as the Economists wish to do, or to the level of the "average worker", as *Svoboda* desires to do.¹⁷

Lenin's perspective was to build a Marxist vanguard party of professional

revolutionaries, an organisation of the "advanced" workers who had been won to the Marxist program for achieving socialism and were trained in such an organisation to be professional revolutionary propagandists, agitators and organisers. Only with such a party could Marxists educate, organise and mobilise the broad masses of the working people — the lower, backward strata — for the proletarian revolution.

But carrying out the latter task required different methods from those needed to win over the working-class vanguard. This was what the "left" communists in Western Europe in 1920 failed to grasp.

VI. WINNING OVER THE VANGUARD AND WINNING OVER THE MASSES

By contrast with his polemics against the Economist deviation in Russia, where he emphasised the methods needed to win over the working-class vanguard, in his 1920 polemic against the "left" communists Lenin emphasised the methods needed to mobilise the broad masses for the struggle for power:

As long as it was (and inasmuch as it still is) a question of winning the proletariat's vanguard over to the side of communism, priority went and still goes to propaganda work ... But when it is a question of practical action by the masses, of the disposition if one may so put it, of vast armies, of the alignment of *all* the class forces in a given society *for the final and decisive battle*, then propaganda methods alone, the mere repetition of the truths of "pure" communism are of no avail. In these circumstances, one must not count in thousands, like the propagandist belonging to a small group that has not yet given leadership to the masses; in these circumstances one must count in millions and tens of millions ...

... even the finest vanguards express the class-consciousness, will, passion, and imagination of tens of thousands, whereas in moments of great upsurge and the exertion of all human capacities, revolutions are made by the class-consciousness, will, passion and imagination of tens of millions, spurred on by a most acute struggle of classes.

Lenin presented the issue in such starkly counterposed terms because he believed that, at least in Germany, the Communists, who now numbered in their ranks some 50,000 workers, had won over, or would very soon win over, the working-class vanguard and that a revolutionary victory was still possible in the very near future if the German Communists could find the correct approach to the revolutionary education of the broad masses of working people. It was only later, in 1921, that economic and political developments showed that the postwar revolutionary situation had ebbed in Germany, and that the Communists had to pursue a combination of tactics aimed at winning over both the bulk of the class-conscious section of the workers, who remained

under the political influence of the reformist Social-Democrats, and extending their influence among the politically backward masses.

Nevertheless, the general political points Lenin made in his April 1920 polemic against the "left" communists had relevance for both situations. Indeed, he observed that:

It is not difficult to be a revolutionary when revolution has already broken out and is in spate, when all people are joining the revolution just because they are carried away, because it is the vogue, and sometimes even from careerist motives. After its victory, the proletariat has to make most strenuous efforts, even the most painful, so as to "liberate" itself from such pseudo-revolutionaries. It is far more difficult — and far more precious — to be a revolutionary when the conditions for direct, open, really mass and really revolutionary struggle do not exist, to be able to champion the interests of the revolution (by propaganda, agitation and organisation) in non-revolutionary bodies, and quite often in downright reactionary bodies, in a non-revolutionary situation, among the masses who are incapable of immediately appreciating the need for revolutionary methods of action. To be able to seek, find and correctly determine the specific path or the particular turn of events that will lead to the real, decisive and final revolutionary struggle — such is the main objective of communism in Western Europe and in America today.

To do this the communists had to avoid artificially cutting themselves off (out of a desire to maintain the "purity" of their revolutionary doctrine or of a fear of opportunist errors) from the non-revolutionary-minded masses through a doctrinaire refusal to conduct revolutionary political work in "non-revolutionary bodies, and quite often in downright reactionary bodies" such as the reformist-dominated trade unions or bourgeois parliaments.

In contrast to the working-class vanguard who can be won to revolutionary Marxism largely through propaganda work (i.e., through ideological argument and theoretical explanations based upon the history of the working-class movement), Lenin explained that the backward masses could only be won to support a proletarian revolution through revolutionary propaganda based upon the direct political experience of the masses:

The proletarian vanguard has been won over ideologically. That is the main thing. Without this, not even the first step towards victory can be made. But that is still quite a long way from victory. Victory cannot be won with a vanguard alone. To throw only the vanguard into the decisive battle, before the entire class, the broad masses, have taken up a position either of direct support for the vanguard, or at least of sympathetic

neutrality towards it and of precluded support for the enemy, would be not merely foolish but criminal. Propaganda and agitation alone are not enough for an entire class, the broad masses of the working people, those oppressed by capital, to take up such a stand. For that, the masses must have their own political experience. Such is the fundamental law of all great revolutions, which has been confirmed with compelling force and vividness, not only in Russia but in Germany as well. To turn resolutely towards communism, it was necessary, not only for the ignorant and often illiterate masses of Russia, but also for the literate and well-educated masses of Germany, to realise from their own bitter experience the absolute impotence and spinelessness, the absolute helplessness and servility to the bourgeoisie, and the utter vileness of the government of the paladins of the Second International.

VII. MASS ACTION AND TACTICAL COMPROMISES

It is a general law of history that only through collective experiences of struggle, of action, can broad masses begin to free themselves from the domination of ruling class ideology and become receptive to revolutionary ideas. In normal times, ruling class ideology dominates the consciousness of the masses not simply because the rulers have control over the means of ideological production (the church, the schools, the mass media, etc.), but also because of the normal conditions of life of the labouring classes. In daily life, the masses are fatigued and brutalised through exploitation and the alienation of labour, as well as through a lack of genuine leisure time.

Even when they sympathise with the idea of socialism, as broad masses have in many countries — sympathies reflected in electoral support for parties which proclaim their allegiance to socialism — this does not mean that they are imbued with a revolutionary consciousness. The normal conditions of life of the broad masses, in which they are the passive victims of exploitation and oppression, tend to imbue them with the idea that revolt is impossible and useless, that their enemies are simply too powerful to be defeated.

But in the heat of great mass mobilisations, of collective actions, these feelings of inferiority and powerless can suddenly disappear. The masses become conscious of their immense potential power as soon as they act together, collectively and in solidarity. That, of course, is why revolutionary Marxists attach extreme importance to collective action by the oppressed, to building mass actions. It is through mass actions that the oppressed begin to break with the obedient and servile behaviour which has been inculcated into them from birth.

Furthermore, without large-scale mobilisations — strikes, rallies, street

demonstrations, etc. — the masses cannot effectively resist attacks by the capitalists and their governments on their living standards and democratic rights. The demoralisation and loss of confidence in their own strength that would follow from passive acceptance of such attacks would be highly damaging to the development of revolutionary consciousness among the masses and their vanguard elements. Thus, organising united action by the working class as a whole or whatever section of it can presently be won to struggle against the attacks of the capitalist rulers is an objective necessity that faces the party as a prerequisite for its future growth.

The revolutionary Marxist party invariably begins as, and in normal times can count in its ranks and among its followers, only a minority of the working class and the oppressed in general, sometimes a numerically insignificant minority in relation to the population as a whole. The majority of the working class and its potential allies — the students, the urban middle classes, the peasantry in those countries where it remains a significant section of the population — do not agree with the party's program and are not prepared to follow its call to action. They are under the influence of pro-capitalist leaderships who fear the potential radicalising effect of mass mobilisations and therefore have no desire to organise mass struggles.

How then can the Marxist vanguard party draw broad masses into collective action, into mass anticapitalist struggles? Lenin explained in his 1920 polemic with the "left" communists that this would invariably require the Marxist party to make tactical compromises with the leaders of the bourgeois-reformist parties that the masses still looked to for political leadership:

Capitalism would not be capitalism if the proletariat were not surrounded by a large number of exceedingly motley types intermediate between the proletarian and the semi-proletarian (who earns his livelihood in part by the sale of his labour-power), between the semi-proletarian and the small peasant (and petty artisan, handicraft worker and small master in general), between the small peasant and the middle peasant, and so on, and if the proletariat itself were not divided into more developed and less developed strata, if it were not divided according to territorial origin, trade, sometimes according to religion, and so on. From all this follows the necessity, the absolute necessity, for the Communist Party, the vanguard of the proletariat, its class-conscious section, to resort to changes of tack, to conciliation and compromises with the various groups of proletarians, with the various parties of the workers and small masters. It is entirely a matter of *knowing how* to apply these tactics in order to *raise* — not lower — the *general* level of proletarian class-consciousness, revolutionary spirit, and ability to fight and win.

He reinforced this point by explaining that the Bolsheviks had repeatedly made tactical compromises for limited aims with liberal bourgeois and petty-bourgeois reformist political groups:

Incidentally, it should be noted that the Bolsheviks' victory over the Mensheviks called for the application of tactics of changes of tack, conciliation and compromises, not only before *but also after* the October Revolution of 1917, but the changes of tack and compromises were, of course, such as assisted, boosted and consolidated the Bolsheviks at the expense of the Mensheviks. The petty-bourgeois democrats (including the Mensheviks) inevitably vacillate between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, between bourgeois democracy and the soviet system, between reformism and revolutionism, between love for the workers and fear of the proletarian dictatorship, etc. The communists' proper tactics should consist in *utilising* these vacillations, not ignoring them; utilising them calls for concessions to elements that are turning towards the proletariat — whenever and in the measure that they turn towards the proletariat — in addition to fighting those who turn towards the bourgeoisie. As a result of the application of the correct tactics, Menshevism began to disintegrate, and has been disintegrating more and more in our country; the stubbornly opportunist leaders are being isolated, and the best of the workers and the best elements among the petty-bourgeois democrats are being brought into our camp.

In another section of his booklet, Lenin declared that "the entire history of Bolshevism, both before and after the October Revolution, is *full* of changes of tack, conciliatory tactics and compromises with other parties, including bourgeois parties!", adding that any in-principle rejection of such tactical compromises amounted to a rejection of Marxism, of revolutionary proletarian politics in favour of the sectarian-abstentionist methods of petty-bourgeois intellectualist anarchism:

To carry out a war for the overthrow of the international bourgeoisie, a war which is a hundred times more difficult, protracted and complex than the most stubborn of ordinary wars between states, and to renounce in advance any change of tack, or any utilisation of a conflict of interests (even if temporary) among one's enemies, or any conciliation or compromise with possible allies (even if they are temporary, unstable, vacillating or conditional allies) — is that not ridiculous in the extreme? ...

The more powerful enemy can be vanquished only by exerting the utmost effort, and by the most thorough, careful, attentive, skillful and *obligatory* use of any, even the smallest, rift between the enemies, any conflict of interests among the bourgeoisie of the various countries and among the various groups or types of bourgeoisie within the various countries, and also by taking advantage of any, even the smallest, opportunity

of winning a mass ally, even though this ally is temporary, vacillating, unstable, unreliable and conditional. Those who do not understand this reveal a failure to understand even the smallest grain of Marxism, of modern scientific socialism *in general*.

This tactical perspective was developed in more detail between the Comintern's 3rd congress, held June-July 1921, and its 4th congress, held in November 1922, in the form of the specific tactic of the "united front".

VIII. MASS ACTION AND THE UNITED-FRONT TACTIC

The united-front tactic was first put forward by the leadership of the Communist International in January 1922 to orient the communist parties of Europe toward winning over supporters of the reformist leaderships of the mass-based social-democratic parties in the context of an offensive by the capitalist rulers against the living standards of the working class. There was rising sentiment within the working class for united action to resist this offensive. The Comintern leadership proposed that the communist parties in Europe should seek agreements with the reformist leaders for united action in defence of the immediate interests of the working class.

The most succinct statement of the united-front tactic is a report prepared by Leon Trotsky on the situation facing the French Communist Party, adopted by the Executive Committee of the Comintern (ECCI) in March 1922. The first part of the report — see addendum 2 — provided a general exposition of the united-front tactic, expanding on points made in the "Theses on the United Front" adopted by the ECCI in December 1921, which had also been written by Trotsky, and which were later endorsed by the 4th Comintern congress.

The united-front tactic was conceived as a means for mobilising the masses, for winning influence over them, wresting them away from the political and organisational domination of reformist misleaderships, i.e., it was a specific *party-building tactic*.

The fundamental precondition for any common action between reformists and revolutionary Marxists is that the latter retain their own independent organisation and their freedom to put forward their own views, including criticism of their temporary allies. The essence of the united-front tactic is therefore encapsulated in two phrases: "March separately, strike together!" and "Freedom of criticism, unity of action!"

The united-front tactic may or may not involve formal agreements between revolutionary Marxists and the reformist leaders of mass organisations. While such agreements might be necessary in order to draw broad masses into action, Marxists do not make their initiatives for mass action dependent on prior agreement with the reformist-led mass organisations. By themselves, or together with other left

organisations or independent activists, Marxists should initiate actions around concrete demands.

Of course, in formulating the demands for such mobilisations and selecting the forms of action, they should seek to broaden involvement in the mobilisation as much as possible by including, where possible, members of the reformist-led mass organisations. This means that Marxists should endeavour to maintain a united-front *approach* to these organisations, even when the chances of achieving any united action with them is slight. In this way Marxists can demonstrate that the lack of unity in struggle is not due to any sectarianism on their part, but to the unwillingness of the reformists to struggle against the ruling class and its policies.

The effectiveness of such an approach, of course, depends on Marxists avoiding a purely formal, declamatory application of the united-front tactic, i.e., calling on the reformist organisations and their supporters to join in a common struggle for demands which are alien to the actual situation and therefore find no response among broader forces. By its very nature, the united-front tactic can only be fruitful in exposing the unwillingness of the reformists to struggle if it is based on a realistic appraisal of the situation — of the immediate, basic interests that are arousing a willingness among the reformists' mass base to engage in struggle against the capitalist rulers.

Exposing the unwillingness of the reformists to lead a serious struggle in defence of the masses' immediate, basic interests, however, is only *one*, and not the most important, aspect of the united-front tactic. Simply exposing the reformist leaders of mass organisations as cowardly and traitorous does not solve the key problem facing the Marxist vanguard party — which is to win the ranks and followers of these mass organisations away from the political influence of the reformists and to bring them under *its* political influence and leadership. That is, the task is not only to break the political hold of the reformists over the masses, but to convince them to put their confidence in the political leadership of the revolutionary Marxists. To do this, Marxists need to be able to demonstrate to the masses, *on the basis of their own political experience*, that the Marxists' program, tactics and leadership are *better* than those of the reformists. The fundamental purpose of the united-front tactic, therefore, is *not* to expose the reformists as unreliable leaders. Rather, its fundamental purpose is to provide the *most favourable conditions* to enable the Marxists to demonstrate that they are *better leaders* than the reformists. This also means that whether or not the united-front tactic is *useful* at any particular time depends upon whether the application of this tactic will, in the given circumstances, *actually assist the Marxist party to bring broader forces under its political influence*.

For Marxists, there can be no tactical blueprints, good for all times and circumstances. Tactics must always be *concrete*, i.e., devised to fit particular situations and relationships of forces. The united-front tactic, like all the tactics employed by Marxists, is aimed at facilitating the creation of a revolutionary vanguard party capable of educating, organising and mobilising the working-class masses to carry out a proletarian revolution and the building of the classless socialist society. ■

'LEFT-WING' COMMUNISM — AN INFANTILE DISORDER

By V.I. Lenin

I IN WHAT SENSE WE CAN SPEAK OF THE INTERNATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

In the first months after the proletariat in Russia had won political power (October 25 [November 7], 1917), it might have seemed that the enormous difference between backward Russia and the advanced countries of Western Europe would lead to the proletarian revolution in the latter countries bearing very little resemblance to ours. We now possess quite considerable international experience, which shows very definitely that certain fundamental features of our revolution have a significance that is not local, or peculiarly national, or Russian alone, but international. I am not speaking here of international significance in the broad sense of the term: not merely several but all the primary features of our revolution, and many of its secondary features, are of international significance in the meaning of its effect on all countries. I am speaking of it in the narrowest sense of the word, taking international significance to mean the international validity or the historical inevitability of a repetition, on an international scale, of what has taken place in our country. It must be admitted that certain fundamental features of our revolution do possess that significance.

It would, of course, be grossly erroneous to exaggerate this truth and to extend it beyond certain fundamental features of our revolution. It would also be erroneous to lose sight of the fact that, soon after the victory of the proletarian revolution in at least one of the advanced countries, a sharp change will probably come about: Russia will cease to be the model and will once again become a backward country (in the "soviet" and the socialist sense).

At the present moment in history, however, it is the Russian model that reveals to