

“Trade Unions are the schools of socialism. It is in trade unions that workers educate themselves and become socialists, because under their very eyes the every day struggle with capital is taking place.”—Karl Marx

This pamphlet contains some excerpts from the extensive work that Lenin wrote on Trade Unions. It is hoped that they will provide a basis for discussion around the current position and issues of today's trade union movement.

Trade Unions are suffering from the fallout of Thatcherism including anti-trade union laws and the effects associated with partnership and privatisation. The social consensus of the Post World War Two period has been systematically eroded by global capital, this erosion has intensified and capitalism has gained new confidence since the dismantling of the Soviet Union.

Political activists working within the trade unions are often faced with hostility, a reactionary leadership, bureaucracy, careerism and ineffectual or non-existent organisation and education strategies. A move towards servicing 'clients' rather than carrying out the democratic decisions of the members is seriously affecting the ability of the trade unions to organise, lead and educate the working classes.

The excerpts of Lenin's work are intended to look at why we must continue to work in this area, what we have to gain from this and also look at how the economic struggle cannot be our only focus. We need also to continue to struggle and build our influence within the social, cultural and political sphere if we are to build a base from which to raise the consciousness of the working class .

James Connolly on Trade Unions

Recently I have been complaining in this column and elsewhere of the tendency in the Labour movement to mistake mere concentration upon the industrial field for essentially revolutionary advance. My point was that the amalgamation or federation of unions, unless carried out by men and women with the proper revolutionary spirit, was as likely to create new obstacles in the way of effective warfare, as to make that warfare possible. The argument was reinforced by citations of what is taking place in the ranks of the railwaymen and in the transport industry. There we find that the amalgamations and federations are rapidly becoming engines for steam-rolling or suppressing all manifestations of revolutionary activity, or effective demonstrations of brotherhood. Every appeal to take industrial action on behalf of a union in distress is blocked by insisting upon the necessity of "first obtaining the sanction of the Executive," and in practice it is found that the process of obtaining that sanction is so long, so cumbrous, and surrounded with so many rules and regulations that the union in distress is certain to be either disrupted or bankrupted before the Executive can be moved. The Greater Unionism is found in short to be forging greater fetters for the working class; to bear to the real revolutionary industrial unionism the same relation as the servile State would bear to the Co-operative Commonwealth of our dreams.

We are not so fatuous as to suggest that continuous warfare shall be waged by general strikes whenever a member considers he has a grievance, or whenever an official encounters a difficulty, but we feel that we are drifting back to the position we were in prior to 1911. A Federation with 29 Unions as its constituents, but with no ties more binding than the payment of 3d. per member per year, will not, and cannot, meet the requirements of modern industry. We are responsible to a quarter of a million men, and the existing methods are utterly incapable of protecting them from the insidious attacks of the employers. The organization that is afraid of making a massed attack will experience a series of isolated disasters. The workers' organization secures respect and consideration in proportion to the extent to which it can hamper and embarrass the employers against whom it is pitted.

The employers move, strike, move, and strike again with the rapidity of a serpent, while we are turning about and contorting with the facility of an alligator. We have at once to determine whether the future is to mean for us efficiency, aptitude, capacity and life, or muddle, incompetence, decay and death.

Each union and each branch of each union desires above all things to show a good balance sheet, and that that might be done every nerve is strained to keep their members at work, and in a condition to pay subscriptions. Hence the pitiful dodges to avoid taking sympathetic action in support of other unions, and hence also the constant victories of the master class upon the industrial field.

Just what is the real remedy for this state of matters, it would be hard to say. But it is at least certain that the organizations I have been speaking of have not discovered the true methods of working-class organizations. They may be on the road to discovering it.

James Connolly (1914)

Lenin on Trade Unions

Should Revolutionaries work in Reactionary Trade Unions?

The German “Lefts” consider that, as far as they are concerned, the reply to this question is an unqualified negative. In their opinion, declamations and angry outcries against “reactionary” and “counter-revolutionary” trade unions are sufficient “proof” that it is unnecessary and even inexcusable for revolutionaries and Communists to work in yellow, social-chauvinist, compromising and counter-revolutionary trade unions.

However firmly the German “Lefts” may be convinced of the revolutionism of such tactics, the latter are in fact fundamentally wrong, and contain nothing but empty phrases.

We cannot but regard as equally ridiculous and childish nonsense the pompous, very learned, and frightfully revolutionary disquisitions of the German Lefts to the effect that Communists cannot and should not work in reactionary trade unions, that it is permissible to turn down such work, that it is necessary to withdraw from the trade unions and create a brand-new and immaculate “Workers’ Union” invented by very pleasant (and, probably, for the most part very youthful) Communists, etc., etc.

Capitalism inevitably leaves socialism the legacy, on the one hand, of the old trade and craft distinctions among the workers, distinctions evolved in the course of centuries; on the other hand, trade unions, which only very slowly, in the course of years and years, can and will develop into broader industrial unions with less of the craft union about them (embracing entire industries, and not only crafts, trades and occupations), and later proceed, through these industrial unions, to eliminate the division of labour among people, to educate and school people, give them *all-round development and an all-round training*, so that they *are able to do everything*.

We can (and must) begin to build socialism, not with abstract human material, or with human material specially prepared by us, but with the human material bequeathed to us by capitalism. True, that is no easy matter, but no other approach to this task is serious enough to warrant discussion.

The trade unions were a tremendous step forward for the working class in the early days of capitalist development, inasmuch as they marked a transition from the workers’ disunity and helplessness to the *rudiments* of class organisation. When the *revolutionary party of the proletariat*, the *highest* form of proletarian class organisation, began to take shape (and the Party will not merit the name until it learns to weld the leaders into one indivisible whole with the class and the masses) the trade unions inevitably began to reveal *certain* reactionary features, a certain craft narrow-mindedness, a certain tendency to be non-political, a certain inertness, etc. However, the development of the proletariat did not, and could not, proceed anywhere in the world otherwise than through the trade unions, through reciprocal action between them and the party of the working class. The proletariat’s conquest of political power is a gigantic step forward for the proletariat as a class, and the Party must more than ever and in a new way, not only in the old, educate and guide the trade unions, at the same time bearing in mind that they are and will long remain an indispensable “school of communism” and a preparatory school that trains proletarians to exercise their dictatorship, an indispensable organisation of the workers for the gradual transfer of the management of the whole economic life of the country to the working *class* (and not to the separate trades), and later to all the working people.

In the sense mentioned above, a *certain* “reactionism” in the trade unions is *inevitable* under the dictatorship of the proletariat. Not to understand this means a complete failure to understand the fundamental conditions of the *transition* from capitalism to socialism. It would be egregious folly to fear *this* “reactionism” or to try to *evade* or leap over it, for it would mean fearing that function of the proletarian vanguard which consists in training, educating, enlightening and drawing into the new life the most backward strata and masses of the working class and the peasantry. On the other hand, it would be a still graver error to postpone the achievement of the dictatorship of the proletariat until a time when there will not be a single worker with a narrow-minded craft outlook, or with craft and craft-union prejudices. The art of politics (and the Communist’s correct understanding of his tasks) consists in correctly gauging the conditions and the moment when the vanguard of the proletariat can successfully assume power, when it is able—during and after the seizure of power—to win adequate support from sufficiently broad strata of the working class and of the non-proletarian working masses, and when it is able thereafter to maintain, consolidate and extend its rule by educating, training and attracting ever broader masses of the working people.

Further. In countries more advanced than Russia, a certain reactionism in the trade unions has been and was bound to be manifested in a far greater measure than in our country. Our Mensheviks found support in the trade unions (and to some extent still do so in a small number of unions), as a result of the latter’s craft narrow-mindedness, craft selfishness and opportunism. The Mensheviks of the West have acquired a much firmer footing in the trade unions; there the *craft-union, narrow-minded, selfish, case-hardened, covetous, and petty-bourgeois “labour aristocracy,” imperialist-minded, and imperialist-corrupted*, has developed into a much stronger section than in our country. That is incontestable.

This struggle must be waged ruthlessly, and it must unfailingly be brought—as we brought it—to a point when all the incorrigible leaders of opportunism and social-chauvinism are completely discredited and driven out of the trade unions. Political power cannot be captured (and the attempt to capture it should not be made) until the struggle has reached a *certain* stage. This “certain stage” will be *different* in different countries and in different circumstances; it can be correctly gauged only by thoughtful, experienced and knowledgeable political leaders of the proletariat in each particular country.

We are waging a struggle against the “labour aristocracy” in the name of the masses of the workers and in order to win them over to our side; we are waging the struggle against the opportunist and social-chauvinist leaders in order to win the working class over to our side. It would be absurd to forget this most elementary and most self-evident truth. Yet it is this very absurdity that the German “Left” Communists perpetrate when, *because* of the reactionary and counter-revolutionary character of the trade union *top leadership*, they jump to the conclusion that . . . we must withdraw from the trade unions, refuse to work in them, and create new and *artificial* forms of labour organisation! This is so unpardonable a blunder that it is tantamount to the greatest service Communists could render the bourgeoisie. Like all the opportunist, social-chauvinist, and Kautskyite trade union leaders, our Mensheviks are nothing but “agents of the bourgeoisie in the working-class movement,” or “labour lieutenants of the capitalist class,” to use the splendid and profoundly true expression of the followers of Daniel De Leon in America. To refuse to work in the reactionary trade unions means leaving the insufficiently developed or backward masses of workers under the influence of the reactionary leaders, the agents of the bourgeoisie, the labour aristocrats, or “workers who have become completely

bourgeois.”

This ridiculous “theory” that Communists should not work in reactionary trade unions reveals with the utmost clarity the frivolous attitude of the “Left” Communists towards the question of influencing the “masses,” and their misuse of clamour about the “masses.” If you want to help the “masses” and win the sympathy and support of the “masses,” you should not fear difficulties, or pinpricks, chicanery, insults and persecution from the “leaders” (who, being opportunists and social-chauvinists, are in most cases directly or indirectly connected with the bourgeoisie and the police), but must absolutely *work wherever the masses are to be found*. You must be capable of any sacrifice, of overcoming the greatest obstacles, in order to carry on agitation and propaganda systematically, perseveringly, persistently and patiently in those institutions, societies and associations -- even the most reactionary—in which proletarian or semi-proletarian masses are to be found. The trade unions and the workers’ co-operatives are the very organisations in which the masses are to be found.

These facts make crystal clear something that is confirmed by thousands of other symptoms, namely, that class-consciousness and the desire for organisation are growing among the proletarian masses, among the rank and file, among the backward elements. Millions of workers in Great Britain, France and Germany are *for the first time* passing from a complete lack of organisation to the elementary, lowest, simplest, and (to those still thoroughly imbued with bourgeois-democratic prejudices) most easily comprehensible form of organisation, namely, the trade unions; yet the revolutionary but imprudent Left Communists stand by, crying out “the masses, the masses!” but *refusing to work within the trade unions*, on the pretext that they are “reactionary,” and invent a brand-new, immaculate little “Workers’ Union,” which is guiltless of bourgeois-democratic prejudices and innocent of craft or narrow-minded craft-union sins, a union which, they claim, will be (!) a broad organisation.

Those “Left” revolutionaries who . . . like some of the revolutionaries in the American Industrial Workers of the World advocate quitting the reactionary trade unions and refusing to work in them. These men, the “leaders” of opportunism, will no doubt resort to every device of bourgeois diplomacy and to the aid of bourgeois governments, the clergy, the police and the courts, to keep Communists out of the trade unions, oust them by every means, make their work in the trade unions as unpleasant as possible, and insult, bait and persecute them. We must be able to stand up to all this, agree to make any sacrifice, and even -- if need be—to resort to various stratagems, artifices and illegal methods, to evasions and subterfuges, as long as we get into the trade unions, remain in them, and carry on communist work within them at all costs.

Lenin (1920)

On Strikes

In recent years, workers’ strikes have become extremely frequent in Russia. There is no longer a single industrial gubernia in which there have not occurred several strikes. And in the big cities strikes never cease. It is understandable, therefore, that class-conscious workers and socialists should more and more frequently concern themselves with the question of the significance of strikes, of methods of conducting them, and of the tasks of socialists participating in them.

We wish to attempt to outline some of our ideas on these questions. In our first article we plan to deal generally with the significance of strikes in the working-class movement; in the second we shall

deal with anti-strike laws in Russia; and in the third, with the way strikes were and are conducted in Russia and with the attitude that class-conscious workers should adopt to them.

In the first place we must seek an explanation for the outbreak and spread of strikes. Everyone who calls to mind strikes from personal experience, from reports of others, or from the newspapers will see immediately that strikes break out and spread wherever big factories arise and grow in number.

Why is it that large-scale factory production always leads to strikes? It is because capitalism must necessarily lead to a struggle of the workers against the employers, and when production is on a large scale the struggle of necessity takes on the form of strikes.

Capitalism is the name given to that social system under which the land, factories, implements, etc., belong to a small number of landed proprietors and capitalists, while the mass of the people possesses no property, or very little property, and is compelled to hire itself out as workers. The landowners and factory owners hire workers and make them produce wares of this or that kind which they sell on the market. The factory owners, furthermore, pay the workers only such a wage as provides a bare subsistence for them and their families, while everything the worker produces over and above this amount goes into the factory owner's pocket, as his profit. Under capitalist economy, therefore, the people in their mass are the hired workers of others, they do not work for themselves but work for employers for wages. It is understandable that the employers always try to reduce wages; the less they give the workers, the greater their profit. The workers try to get the highest possible wage in order to provide their families with sufficient and wholesome food, to live in good homes, and to dress as other people do and not like beggars. A constant struggle is, therefore, going on between employers and workers over wages; the employer is free to hire whatever worker he thinks fit and, therefore, seeks the cheapest. The worker is free to hire himself out to an employer of his choice, so that he seeks the dearest, the one that will pay him the most. Whether the worker works in the country or in town, whether he hires himself out to a landlord, a rich peasant, a contractor, or a factory owner, he always bargains with the employer, fights with him over the wages.

But is it possible for a single worker to wage a struggle by himself? When the people are ruined to such an extent that there is always a large number of unemployed in the towns and villages, when the factory owners amass huge fortunes and the small proprietors are squeezed out by the millionaires, the individual worker becomes *absolutely powerless* in face of the capitalist. It then becomes possible for the capitalist to crush the worker completely, to drive him to his death at slave labour and, indeed, not him alone, but his wife and children with him. If we take, for instance, those occupations in which the workers have not yet been able to win the protection of the law and in which they cannot offer resistance to the capitalists, we see an inordinately long working day, sometimes as long as 17-19 hours; we see children of 5 or 6 years of age overstraining themselves at work; we see a generation of permanently hungry workers who are gradually dying from starvation. Even under slavery or serfdom there was never any oppression of the working people as terrible as that under capitalism when the workers cannot put up a resistance or cannot win the protection of laws that restrict the arbitrary actions of the employers.

And so, in order to stave off their reduction to such extremities, the workers begin a desperate struggle. As they see that each of them, individually, is completely powerless and that the oppression of capital threatens to crush him, the workers begin to revolt jointly against their employers. Workers' strikes begin. At first the workers often fail to realise what they are trying to achieve, lacking

consciousness of the *wherefore* of their action; they simply smash the machines and destroy the factories. They merely want to display their wrath to the factory owners; they are trying out their joint strength in order to get out of an unbearable situation, without yet understanding why their position is so hopeless and what they should strive for.

In all countries the wrath of the workers first took the form of isolated revolts—the police and factory owners in Russia call them “mutinies.” In all countries these isolated revolts gave rise to more or less peaceful strikes, on the one hand, and to the all-sided struggle of the working class for its emancipation, on the other.

What significance have strikes (or stoppages) for the struggle of the working class? To answer this question, we must first have a fuller view of strikes. The wages of a worker are determined, as we have seen, by an agreement between the employer and the worker, and if, under these circumstances, the individual worker is completely powerless, it is obvious that workers must fight jointly for their demands, they are compelled to organise strikes either to prevent the employers from reducing wages or to obtain higher wages. It is a fact that in every country with a capitalist system there are strikes of workers. Everywhere, in all the European countries and in America, the workers feel themselves powerless when they are disunited; they can only offer resistance to the employers jointly, either by striking or threatening to strike. As capitalism develops, as big factories are more rapidly opened, as the petty capitalists are more and more ousted by the big capitalists, the more urgent becomes the need for the joint resistance of the workers, because unemployment increases, competition sharpens between the capitalists who strive to produce their wares at the cheapest (to do which they have to pay the workers as little as possible), and the fluctuations of industry become more accentuated and crises more acute. When industry prospers, the factory owners make big profits but do not think of sharing them with the workers; but when a crisis breaks out, the factory owners try to push the losses on to the workers. The necessity for strikes in capitalist society has been recognised to such an extent by everybody in the European countries that the law in those countries does not forbid the organisation of strikes; only in Russia barbarous laws against strikes still remain in force.

However, strikes, which arise out of the very nature of capitalist society, signify the beginning of the working-class struggle against that system of society. When the rich capitalists are confronted by individual, propertyless workers, this signifies the utter enslavement of the workers. But when those propertyless workers unite, the situation changes. There is no wealth that can be of benefit to the capitalists if they cannot find workers willing to apply their labour-power to the instruments and materials belonging to the capitalists and produce new wealth. As long as workers have to deal with capitalists on an individual basis they remain veritable slaves who must work continuously to profit another in order to obtain a crust of bread, who must for ever remain docile and inarticulate hired servants. But when the workers state their demands jointly and refuse to submit to the money-bags, they cease to be slaves, they become human beings, they begin to demand that their labour should not only serve to enrich a handful of idlers, but should also enable those who work to live like human beings. The slaves begin to put forward the demand to become masters, not to work and live as the landlords and capitalists want them to, but as the working people themselves want to. Strikes, therefore, always instil fear into the capitalists, because they begin to undermine their supremacy.

The factories, the landlords' land, the machines, the railways, etc., etc., are all like wheels in a giant machine—the machine that extracts various products, processes them, and delivers them to their destination. The whole of this machine is set in motion by *the worker* who tills the soil, extracts ores,

makes commodities in the factories, builds houses, work shops, and railways. When the workers refuse to work, the entire machine threatens to stop. Every strike reminds the capitalists that it is the workers and not they who are the real masters—the workers who are more and more loudly proclaiming their rights. Every strike reminds the workers that their position is not hopeless, that they are not alone. In normal, peaceful times the worker does his job without a murmur, does not contradict the employer, and does not discuss his condition. In times of strikes he states his demands in a loud voice, he reminds the employers of all their abuses, he claims his rights, he does not think of himself and his wages alone, he thinks of all his workmates who have downed tools together with him and who stand up for the workers' cause, fearing no privations. Every strike means many privations for the working people, terrible privations that can be compared only to the calamities of war.

Despite all these sufferings, the workers despise those who desert their fellow workers and make deals with the employers. Despite all these sufferings, brought on by strikes, the workers of neighbouring factories gain renewed courage when they see that their comrades have engaged themselves in struggle. "People who endure so much to bend one single bourgeois will be able to break the power of the whole bourgeoisie," said one great teacher of socialism, Engels, speaking of the strikes of the English workers. Every strike brings thoughts of socialism very forcibly to the worker's mind, thoughts of the struggle of the entire working class for emancipation from the oppression of capital.

A strike teaches workers to understand what the strength of the employers and what the strength of the workers consists in; it teaches them not to think of their own employer alone and not of their own immediate workmates alone but of all the employers, the whole class of capitalists and the whole class of workers. When a factory owner who has amassed millions from the toil of several generations of workers refuses to grant a modest increase in wages or even tries to reduce wages to a still lower level and, if the workers offer resistance, throws thousands of hungry families out into the street, it becomes quite clear to the workers that the capitalist class as a whole is the enemy of the whole working class and that the workers can depend only on themselves and their united action. It often happens that a factory owner does his best to deceive the workers, to pose as a benefactor, and conceal his exploitation of the workers by some petty sops or lying promises. A strike always demolishes this deception at one blow by showing the workers that their "benefactor" is a wolf in sheep's clothing.

A strike, moreover, opens the eyes of the workers to the nature, not only of the capitalists, but of the government and the laws as well. Just as the factory owners try to pose as benefactors of the workers, the government officials and their lackeys try to assure the workers that the tsar and the tsarist government are equally solicitous of both the factory owners and the workers, as justice requires. The worker does not know the laws, he has no contact with government officials, especially with those in the higher posts, and, as a consequence, often believes all this. Then comes a strike. The public prosecutor, the factory inspector, the police, and frequently troops, appear at the factory. The workers learn that they have violated the law: the employers are permitted by law to assemble and openly discuss ways of reducing workers wages, but workers are declared criminals if they come to a joint agreement! Workers are driven out of their homes; the police close the shops from which the workers might obtain food on credit, an effort is made to incite the soldiers against the workers even when the workers conduct themselves quietly and peacefully.

The workers begin to understand that laws are made in the interests of the rich alone; that government officials protect those interests; that the working people are gagged and not allowed to make known their needs; that the working class must win for itself the right to strike, the right to

publish workers' newspapers, the right to participate in a national assembly that enacts laws and supervises their fulfilment. The government itself knows full well that strikes open the eyes of the workers and for this reason it has such a fear of strikes and does everything to stop them as quickly as possible.

Strikes, therefore, teach the workers to unite; they show them that they can struggle against the capitalists only when they are united; strikes teach the workers to think of the struggle of the whole working class against the whole class of factory owners and against the arbitrary, police government. This is the reason that socialists call strikes "a school of war," a school in which the workers learn to make war on their enemies for the liberation of the whole people, of all who labour, from the yoke of government officials and from the yoke of capital.

"A school of war" is, however, not war itself. When strikes are widespread among the workers, some of the workers (including some socialists) begin to believe that the working class can confine itself to strikes, strike funds, or strike associations alone; that by strikes alone the working class can achieve a considerable improvement in its conditions or even its emancipation. When they see what power there is in a united working class and even in small strikes, some think that the working class has only to organise a general strike throughout the whole country for the workers to get everything they want from the capitalists and the government. This idea was also expressed by the workers of other countries when the working-class movement was in its early stages and the workers were still very inexperienced. *It is a mistaken idea.* Strikes are *one* of the ways in which the working class struggles for its emancipation, but they are not the only way; and if the workers do not turn their attention to other means of conducting the struggle, they will slow down the growth and the successes of the working class.

Furthermore, even in those countries where workers' unions exist openly and have huge funds at their disposal, the working class can still not confine itself to strikes as a means of struggle. All that is necessary is a hitch in the affairs of industry and the factory owners will even deliberately cause strikes, because it is to their advantage to cease work for a time and to deplete the workers' funds. The workers, therefore, cannot, under any circumstances, confine themselves to strike actions and strike associations. Secondly, strikes can only be successful where workers are sufficiently class-conscious, where they are able to select an opportune moment for striking, where they know how to put forward their demands, and where they have connections with socialists and are able to procure leaflets and pamphlets through them. There are still very few such workers in Russia, and every effort must be exerted to increase their number in order to make the working-class cause known to the masses of workers and to acquaint them with socialism and the working-class struggle. This is a task that the socialists and class-conscious workers must undertake jointly by organising a socialist working-class party for this purpose. Thirdly, strikes, as we have seen, show the workers that the government is their enemy and that a struggle against the government must be carried on. Actually, it is strikes that have gradually taught the working class of all countries to struggle against the governments for workers' rights and for the rights of the people as a whole. Here we must point out that strikes are, as we said above, "a school of war" and not the war itself, that strikes are only one means of struggle, only one aspect of the working-class movement. From individual strikes the workers can and must go over, as indeed they are actually doing in all countries, to a struggle of the entire working class for the emancipation of all who labour. When all class-conscious workers become socialists, i.e., when they strive for this emancipation, when they unite throughout the whole country in order to spread

socialism among the workers, in order to teach the workers all the means of struggle against their enemies, when they build up a socialist workers' party that struggles for the emancipation of the people as a whole from government oppression and for the emancipation of all working people from the yoke of capital—only then will the working class become an integral part of that great movement of the workers of all countries that unites all workers and raises the red banner inscribed with the words: “Workers of all countries, unite!”

Lenin (1899)

Trade-Unionist Politics and Social Democratic Politics

Social-Democracy leads the struggle of the working class, not only for better terms for the sale of labour-power, but for the abolition of the social system that compels the propertyless to sell themselves to the rich. Social-Democracy represents the working class, not in its relation to a given group of employers alone, but in its relation to all classes of modern society and to the state as an organised political force. Hence, it follows that not only must Social-Democrats not confine themselves exclusively to the economic struggle, but that they must not allow the organisation of economic exposures to become the predominant part of their activities. We must take up actively the political education of the working class and the development of its political consciousness. The question arises, what should political education consist in? Can it be confined to the propaganda of working-class hostility to the autocracy? Of course not. It is not enough *to explain* to the workers that they are politically oppressed. Agitation must be conducted with regard to every concrete example of *this* oppression. Inasmuch as this oppression affects the most diverse classes of society, inasmuch as it manifests itself in the most varied spheres of life and activity -- vocational, civic, personal, family, religious, scientific, etc., etc. -- is it not evident that *we shall not be fulfilling our task* of developing the political consciousness of the workers if we do not *undertake* the organisation of the *political exposure* of the autocracy in *all its aspects*? In order to carry on agitation round concrete instances of oppression, these instances must be exposed (as it is necessary to expose factory abuses in order to carry on economic agitation).

In reality, it is possible to “raise the activity of the working masses” *only* when this activity is *not restricted* to “political agitation on an economic basis.” A basic condition for the necessary expansion of political agitation is the organisation of *comprehensive* political exposure. *In no way* except by means of such exposures *can* the masses be trained in political consciousness and revolutionary activity.

Working-class consciousness cannot be genuine political consciousness unless the workers are trained to respond to *all* cases of tyranny, oppression, violence, and abuse, no matter *what class* is affected. The consciousness of the working masses cannot be genuine class-consciousness, unless the workers learn, from concrete, and above all from topical, political facts and events to observe *every* other social class in *all* the manifestations of its intellectual, ethical, and political life; unless they learn to apply in practice the materialist analysis and the materialist estimate of *all* aspects of the life and activity of *all* classes, strata, and groups of the population. Those who concentrate the attention, observation, and consciousness of the working class exclusively, or even mainly, upon itself alone are not Social-Democrats; for the self-knowledge of the working class is indissolubly bound up, not solely with a fully clear theoretical understanding -- or rather, not so much with the theoretical, as with the practical, understanding -- of the relationships between *all* the various classes of modern society. In

order to become a Social-Democrat, the worker must have a clear picture in his mind of the economic nature and the social and political features of the landlord and the priest, the high state official and the peasant, the student and the vagabond; he must know their strong and weak points; he must understand what interests are reflected by certain institutions and certain laws and how they are reflected. But this “clear picture” cannot be obtained from any book. It can be obtained only from living examples and from exposures that follow close upon what is going on about us at a given moment; upon what is being discussed; upon what finds expression in such and such events, in such and such statistics, in such and such court sentences, etc., etc. These comprehensive political exposures are an essential and *fundamental* condition for training the masses in revolutionary activity.

The Working Class as Vanguard Fighter for Democracy

We have seen that the conduct of the broadest political agitation and, consequently, of all-sided political exposures is an absolutely necessary and a *paramount* task of our activity, if this activity is to be truly Social-Democratic. However, we arrived at this conclusion solely on the grounds of the pressing needs of the working class for political knowledge and political training. But such a presentation of the question is too narrow, for it ignores the general democratic tasks of Social-Democracy. “Everyone agrees” that it is necessary to develop the political consciousness of the working class. The question is, *how* that is to be done and what is required to do it. The economic struggle merely “impels” the workers to realise the government’s attitude towards the working class. Consequently, *however much we may try* to “lend the economic, struggle itself a political character,” *we shall never be able* to develop the political consciousness of the workers by keeping within the framework of the economic struggle, for *that framework is too narrow*.

Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers *only from without*, that is, only from outside the economic struggle, from outside the sphere of relations between workers and employers. The sphere from which alone it is possible to obtain this knowledge is the sphere of relationships of *all* classes and strata to the state and the government, the sphere of the interrelations between *all* classes. For that reason, the reply to the question as to what must be done to bring political knowledge to the workers cannot be merely the answer with which, in the majority of cases, the practical workers, especially those inclined towards Economism, mostly content themselves, namely: “To go among the workers.” To bring political knowledge to the *workers* the Social Democrats must *go among all classes of the population*; they must dispatch units of their army *in all directions*.

Let us take the type of Social-Democratic study circle that has become most widespread in the past few years and examine its work. It has “contacts with the workers” and rests content with this, issuing leaflets in which abuses in the factories, the government’s partiality towards the capitalists, and the tyranny of the police are strongly condemned. At workers’ meetings the discussions never, or rarely ever, go beyond the limits of these subjects. Extremely rare are the lectures and discussions held on the history of the revolutionary movement, on questions of the government’s home and foreign policy, on questions of the economic evolution of Russia and of Europe, on the position of the various classes in modern society, etc.

In fact, the ideal leader, as the majority of the members of such circles picture him, is something far more in the nature of a trade union secretary than a socialist political leader. For the secretary of any, say English, trade union always helps the workers to carry on the economic struggle, he helps them to expose factory abuses, explains the injustice of the laws and of measures that hamper the

freedom to strike and to picket, explains the partiality of arbitration court judges who belong to the bourgeois classes, etc., etc. In a word, every trade union secretary conducts and helps to conduct “the economic struggle against the employers and the government.” It cannot be too strongly maintained that *this is still not* Social-Democracy, that the Social-Democrat’s ideal should not be the trade union secretary, but *the tribune of the people*, who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects; who is able to generalise all these manifestations and produce a single picture of police violence and capitalist exploitation; who is able to take advantage of every event, however small, in order to set forth *before all* his socialist convictions and his democratic demands, in order to clarify for *all* and everyone the world-historic significance of the struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat.

We said that a Social Democrat, if he really believes it necessary to develop comprehensively the political consciousness of the proletariat, must “go among all classes of the population.” This gives rise to the questions: how is this to be done? is there a basis for such work among all the other classes? will this not mean a retreat, or lead to a retreat, from the class point of view? Let us deal with these questions.

We must “go among all classes of the population” as theoreticians, as propagandists, as agitators, and as organisers. No-one doubts that the theoretical work of Social-Democrats should aim at studying all the specific features of the social and political condition of the various classes. But extremely little is done in this direction as compared with the work that is done in studying the specific features of factory life. In the committees and study circles, one can meet people who are immersed in the study even of some special branch of the metal industry; but one can hardly ever find members of organisations who are especially engaged in gathering material on some pressing question of social and political life in our country which could serve as a means for conducting Social-Democratic work among other strata of the population. We must also find ways and means of calling meetings of representatives of all social classes that desire to listen to *a democrat*; for he is no Social-Democrat who forgets in practice that “the Communists support every revolutionary movement.” that we are obliged for that reason to expound and emphasise *general democratic tasks before the whole people*, without for a moment concealing our socialist convictions. He is no Social-Democrat who forgets in practice his obligation to be *ahead of all* in raising, accentuating, and solving *every* general democratic question. For it is not enough to call ourselves the “vanguard,” the advanced contingent; we must act in such a way that all the other contingents recognise and are obliged to admit that we are marching in the vanguard.

The point we were discussing was the possible and necessary participation of various social strata in the overthrow of the autocracy; and not only are we *able*, but it is our bounden duty, to guide *these* “activities of the various opposition strata,” if we desire to be the “vanguard.” Not only will our students and liberals, etc., themselves take care of “the struggle that brings them face to face with our political regime”; the police and the officials of the autocratic government will see to this first and foremost. But if “we” desire to be front-rank democrats, we must make it our concern to *direct* the thoughts of those who are dissatisfied only with conditions at the university, etc., to the idea that the entire political system is worthless. *We* must take upon ourselves the task of organising an all-round political struggle under the leadership of our Party in such a manner as to make it possible for all oppositional strata to render their fullest support to the struggle and to our Party. *We* must train our Social-Democratic practical workers to become political leaders, able to guide all the manifestations of

this all-round struggle, able at the right time to “dictate a positive programme of action *Iskra* desires to *elevate* the trade-unionist politics of the working class (to which, through misconception, through lack of training, or through conviction, our practical workers frequently confine themselves) to the level of Social-Democratic politics.

In order to be able to provide the workers with real, comprehensive, and live political knowledge, we must have “our own people,” Social-Democrats, everywhere, among all social strata, and in all positions from which we can learn the inner springs of our state mechanism. Such people are required, not only for propaganda and agitation, but in a still larger measure for organisation. Is there a basis for activity among all classes of the population? Whoever doubts this lags in his consciousness behind the spontaneous awakening of the masses. The working-class movement has aroused and is continuing to arouse discontent in some, hopes of support for the opposition in others, and in still others the realisation that the autocracy is unbearable and must inevitably fall. We would be “politicians” and Social-Democrats in name only (as all too often happens in reality), if we failed to realise that our task is to utilise every manifestation of discontent, and to gather and turn to the best account every protest, however small.

Indeed, is there a single social class in which there are no individuals, groups, or circles that are discontented with the lack of rights? “We must arouse in every section of the population that is at all politically conscious a passion for *political* exposure,” I wrote in my article “Where to begin” [*Iskra*, May (No. 4), 1901], with which I shall deal in greater detail later. “We must not be discouraged by the fact that the voice of political exposure is today so feeble, timid, and infrequent. This is not because of a wholesale submission to police despotism, but because those who are able and ready to make exposures have no tribune from which to speak, no eager and encouraging audience, they do not see anywhere among the people that force to which it would be worth while directing their complaint against the ‘omnipotent’ Russian Government . . . We are now in a position to provide a tribune for the nation-wide exposure of the tsarist government, and it is our duty to do this. That tribune must be a Social-Democratic newspaper.” [*Collected Works*, vol. 5, pp. 21-22.]

The ideal audience for political exposure is the working class, which is first and foremost in need of all-round and live political knowledge, and is most capable of converting this knowledge into active struggle, even when that struggle does not promise “palpable results.” Political exposures are as much a declaration of war against the *government* as economic exposures are a declaration of war against the factory owners. The moral significance of this declaration of war will be all the greater, the wider and more powerful the campaign of exposure will be and the more numerous and determined the social *class* that has *declared war in order to begin the war*. Hence, political exposures in themselves serve as a powerful instrument for *disintegrating* the system we oppose, as a means for diverting from the enemy his casual or temporary allies, as a means for spreading hostility and distrust among the permanent partners of the autocracy.

In our time only a party that will *organise* really *nation-wide* exposures can become the vanguard of the revolutionary forces.

Lenin (1904)