

Then and Now: Another Look At
“What IS To Be Done?”

BY David Finkel

Lenin's 1902 volume *What Is To Be Done?*, along with the *Communist Manifesto* by Marx and Engels and Lenin's *State and Revolution*, make up the three most widely read and quoted classics of the revolutionary Marxist tradition. Of the three, *What Is To Be Done?* is undoubtedly the most abused and factionally misused. At times, it has also been the most popular and influential.

The reasons are not hard to find. Because it deals passionately with the most difficult and testing problem of revolutionary theory—the problem of *organization*—and because Lenin insisted on clear thinking and total intolerance of complacency on this problem above all others, the pamphlet was bound to stir up powerful emotions in the Russian socialist movement to which it was addressed. It did so then, and has continued to do so since.

Among the American revolutionaries who turned to party-building work in the 1970s, *What Is To Be Done?* and some of Lenin's other writings of the *Iskra* period struck a resonant chord. Its bitter denunciations of the amateurishness and sloppiness of the revolutionary movement of its time, of the missed opportunities and the losses caused by state repression of a movement which lacked coordination and sound methods of work, hit home to a '60s radicalized generation. After all, we had seen the New Left disintegrate in chaos and the Black Panther Party virtually wiped out by government legal frame-ups and assassination squads.

The conception of a "party of a new type" seemed to be the key to overcoming our own fumbling amateurishness. At the same time, the notion that the organizing of such a party was the political touchstone of a break with reformism in all its forms, was appropriated, somewhat one-sidedly, from *What Is To Be Done?* For some in the movement, party-building was also key to repeating in the U.S. the successes, however those were interpreted, of the Cuban, Chinese and Vietnamese revolutions. Fundamentally, however, the new movement's enthusiasm for Leninism and for serious, disciplined organization was an expression of revolutionary hope and optimism.

Certain other aspects of the American party-building left's understanding of Lenin had more negative consequences. In *What Is To Be Done?*, Lenin had polemicized against certain prejudices that had grown up within the movement: a dislike for the conscious construction of a strong party center; a distaste for leadership which sometimes was expressed as a demagogic anti-intellectualism (always by other intellectuals, naturally); and fetishism of the supposedly inherent revolutionary

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character of "factory exposures" to the exclusion of broader political organizing. Lenin characterized these trends within the movement with such terms as "primitiveness of organization," "worship of spontaneity," "tailism" and "economism."

These were to become stock phrases of abuse within the U.S. party-building movement (and not only there, as we will see in the case of the term "economism"). However, while it is risky to generalize, these were not the decisive problems of our own recent American party-building movement. Far from shying away from a strong party center, the movement set about building a whole competing set of them—"two, three, many parties of a new type," as a critique published by the Proletarian Unity League caustically put it.

Lenin's justified rejection of the anti-leadership prejudice was magically transformed into the self-justification of "vanguard leaders" who had done next to nothing to win leadership beyond organizing groups whose behavior often verged on cultism. In such cases, centralism substituted for politics. As for Lenin's biting critique of "economism," in the hands of vanguard "parties" and "pre-party formations" with no base in the working class, quotes from Lenin became the justification for abstaining from serious trade union activity, or for refusing to take loyal responsibility for the reform struggles of workers, or for heaping abuse on one's own cadres who did. Again, organizational form became a substitute for working class politics.

To make matters worse, many party-building groups which most stridently proclaimed their "Leninism" were also the loudest in denouncing any independent women's liberation movement as petit-bourgeois if not anti-revolutionary. Many feminists responded in kind, regarding any form of disciplined revolutionary organization as inherently "patriarchal." The result was to deepen the split between revolutionary socialist politics and one of the most important social movements, the feminist movement. Only very slowly and painfully is the split beginning to be overcome.

By now, the party-building groups of all ideological stripes have virtually all collapsed or sharply altered their perspectives. A healthy chunk of their cadres have survived, however. Many remain deeply concerned with what kind of organization can be suitable for the tasks of socialists in the coming years. It is safe to say that for these activists, *What Is To Be Done?* is no longer viewed as a handbook of organization. Today, it lies forgotten and unread on many a bookshelf as the notion of a highly disciplined and centralized revolutionary organization falls from favor. Indeed, many of the

former party-building cadres would like nothing better than to forget their whole experience with such organizations.

It is not my purpose here to historically dissect the '70s party-building movement. I do believe, however, that *What Is To Be Done?* is worth another look in light of the experiences of that movement. The logic of Lenin's argument remains important, particularly in the way that organizational necessities are related to political tasks. By seeing how the parts of the argument fit together, and by looking at Lenin's overall view of the party in light of our recent experiences, we may improve the chances of getting it right as far as politics and organization are concerned in the 1980s.

I am not going to attempt a full discussion of Lenin's party organizing efforts in the context of the situation in Russia of the early 1900s. This has been done admirably in the first volume of Tony Cliff's *Lenin (Building the Party)*, Pluto Press). I have deliberately selected a few themes which I think are both particularly important and subject to repeated misinterpretation. These are: the relationship of revolutionary intellectuals to workers in the party; the relationship between economic and political struggle; and the connection of socialist politics and trade unionism.

Following this an attempt will be made to draw some conclusions about what relevance Lenin's arguments may have for us, in a period where most revolutionaries agree that '70s-style party-building, tight discipline and single-tendenced organization are decidedly not appropriate. The ideas expressed here will certainly be controversial in various sections of the movement, and responses and comments will be welcomed.

Is It Elitist?

A conventional perception of Lenin's argument in *What Is To Be Done?*, and the most commonly stated reason for rejecting it, is that it is openly elitist. The argument is direct: according to Lenin, socialist political consciousness does not emerge from the working class but is brought to it from outside, by revolutionary intellectuals from the professional and middle classes. Therefore, while workers make up the mass force that drives the revolution forward, they cannot be its directing center. Lenin's view of a revolutionary party is thus supposedly one in which workers follow orders imposed from above by intellectuals.

A great many 1960s radicals took the argument this far and rejected Leninism because of it. Others, based on the same understanding, set about organizing their revolutionary groups precisely according to the model of orders handed down by an elite, with hierarchically structured "layers" of leadership, each totally monolithic with respect to lower layers, and with rank and file members forbidden to create political ties with members in other cities. A whole series of other interpretations arose around the movement's fringes: Lenin was an elitist in 1902 but abandoned the "vanguard party" idea after discovering Hegel; the vanguard party notion was correct

in 1902 and 1917 but has long been outdated by the growth of a larger, more advanced and better educated working class; and so on.

Based on a straightforward reading, I want to argue a different proposition: the relationship of revolutionary intellectuals to workers argued in *What Is To Be Done?* is not elitist at all. True, this work did not represent Lenin's "finished" views on the party. True again, the world we live in today is not that of 1902. Nonetheless I think it is crucial to recognize that Lenin's 1902 argument was not elitist, for its time or for now.

The case for the "elitist" interpretation comes from the following famous quote, which many will already know by heart:

We have said that there could not have been Social-Democratic [in the terminology of the time, revolutionary socialist] consciousness among the workers [in the strike wave of the 1890s.] It would have to be brought to them from without. The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade-union consciousness, i.e. the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labor legislation, etc. The theory of socialism, however, grew out of the philosophic, historical and economic theories elaborated by educated representatives of the propertied classes, by intellectuals... Marx and Engels themselves belonged to the bourgeois intelligentsia. In the very same way, in Russia, the theoretical doctrine of Social-Democracy arose altogether independently of the spontaneous growth of the working-class movement; it arose as a natural and inevitable outcome of the development of thought among the revolutionary socialist intelligentsia. (p. 32, New World Paperbacks edition, International Publishers, 1969)

This argument itself didn't occur "spontaneously" to Lenin. He took it straight from Karl Kautsky, the theoretician of the German Social Democratic Party, whom Lenin quotes at length on the subject a few pages later:

The vehicle of science is not in the proletariat, but the bourgeois intelligentsia (Kautsky's emphasis): it was in the minds of individual members of this stratum that modern socialism originated, and it was they who communicated it to the more intellectually developed proletarians who, in their turn, introduce it into the proletarian class struggle where conditions allow that to be done. (p. 40)

It is not hard to see the somewhat mechanical side of Kautsky's way of presenting this argument. It is even easier to see how the argument that the socialist idea originates with intellectuals could be corrupted into the notion that the socialist movement should be run by them. How far this notion was from Lenin's argument, however, can be seen by reading the footnote that Lenin attached to the same discussion, arguing that "every effort must be made to raise the level of the consciousness of the workers in general; it is necessary that the workers do not confine themselves to the artificially restricted limits of 'literature for workers'... only a few (bad) in-

tellethuals believe that it is enough 'for workers' to be told a few things about factory conditions and to have repeated to them over and over again what has long been known." (p. 40-41) Workers needed an organized movement that would enable them to reach the same level as any revolutionary intellectual.

A few paragraphs later, we find a statement no different in principle from Lenin's celebrated 1905 observation that the working class was instinctively and spontaneously socialist:

The working class spontaneously gravitates toward socialism: nevertheless, most widespread (and continuously and diversely revived) bourgeois ideology spontaneously imposes itself upon the working class to a still greater degree. (p. 42 fn)

Both parts of the idea are crucial. The working class *does* spontaneously develop elements of socialist consciousness. But to be fully developed and to change society, this consciousness must be crystallized in *organization*. The process of capitalist production, anarchic yet spontaneously organizing and disciplining the workers and forcing them to wage economic struggle, creates both bourgeois and at least rudimentary forms of socialist ideology. As workers spontaneously "gravitate toward socialism," what kind of organization would be there to develop and train them as leaders?

All of Lenin's scorn was reserved for those revolutionary intellectuals who refused to seriously take up this question. It was their "spontaneity" which he considered thoroughly intolerable, much more than that of the workers. Where were these intellectuals when workers demanded political analysis, leadership, an understanding of the critical issues facing other sections of society (peasants, students, etc.) and the importance of their struggles? What Lenin saw in the trend he called "Economism" were not workers, but intellectuals refusing to give serious theoretical and strategic answers, and couching their refusal to do this in polemics against "over-intellectualism," "imposing a party center on the living movement," and so on. He saw a trend which aspired to leadership by passively reflecting on the existing level of struggle, which at that time included widespread factory-level exposure of abuses and rudimentary trade union organizing, but which "absolutely refuses independently to work out a specifically Social-Democratic politics corresponding to the general tasks of socialism and to present-day conditions in Russia." (p. 44)

For Lenin, an analysis of those conditions pointed to the necessity of a *political* organization, which could not be confused with the much looser form needed for trade unions, which would prepare for an all-Russian national uprising by building a political machine inside the working class. It was no part of his idea—not in 1917, not in 1905 and *not in 1902*—that such a party meant workers following orders from intellectuals.

It would be much closer to the truth to turn this upside down: in a revolutionary party, the revolutionary intellectuals would have to be under the same discipline that was already imposed on workers by the conditions



they lived under and the repression they faced. Within the party, indeed, all distinctions between worker and intellectual needed to be broken down in a process of creating a cadre of *professional revolutionaries* who would be the party's backbone.

But didn't this very conception of professional revolutionary mean that the party itself, whether worker or intellectual in its origins, would be an elite in opposition to the working class as a whole? Isn't that the root of the destruction of socialist democracy?

To answer this one must first look at what Lenin himself wrote about party democracy and leadership:

In politically free countries, (the principle of election of party leadership) is taken for granted... Since the entire political arena is as open to the public view as is a theater stage to the audience, this acceptance or non-acceptance (of the Party's principles by its public figures) is known to all from the press and from public meetings. Everyone knows that a certain political figure began in such and such a way, passed through such and such an evolution, behaved in a trying moment in such and such a manner, and possesses such and such qualities, consequently, *all* party members, knowing all the facts, can elect or refuse to elect this person to a political office. (p. 135)

That is, the party rank and file's control of its leadership is based on information known not just to it, but to the entire working class. In no respect is the party, under such open conditions, sealed off from the masses of workers outside it.

It is precisely because party democracy, in the sense of the open election of leadership and its control by the general membership, must be *real* and not a formality, that Lenin ruthlessly rejected it for Tsarist Russia:

Try to fit this picture into the frame of our autocracy! Is it conceivable in Russia for all "who accept the principles of the Party program and render the Party all possible support" (quoted from the German party's definition of Party membership) to control every action of the revolutionary working in secret? Is it possible for all to elect one of these

revolutionaries to any particular office, when in the very interests of his work, the revolutionary *must* conceal his identity from nine out of ten of these "all"?... You will recognize that "broad democracy" in Party organization, amidst the gloom of the autocracy and the domination of gendarmerie, is nothing more than a *useless and harmful* toy. (p. 136)

The conclusions that follow from this are:

The only serious organizational principle for the active workers of our movement should be the strictest secrecy, the strictest selection of members, and the training of professional revolutionaries. Given these qualities, something even more than "democratism" would be guaranteed to us, namely, complete, comradely, mutual confidence among revolutionaries. This is absolutely essential for us, because there can be no question of replacing it by general democratic control in Russia... Moreover, there is a fairly well-developed public opinion in Russian (and international) revolutionary circles which has a long history behind it, and which sternly and ruthlessly punishes every departure from the duties of comradeship (and "democratism," real and not toy democratism, certainly forms a component part of the conception of comradeship). (p. 138)

Thus, in the absence of democratic conditions, the comradely relations and mutual confidence among the professional revolutionaries—equivalent to what we would call today the party's *cadres* in the workplaces, its organizers at all levels, etc.—become decisive. In America today, these relations and that confidence need not be substituted for formal party democracy, but can grow along with it.

To be frank, we are lucky that this is the case, because one of the crucial factors Lenin relied upon for his argument is virtually absent here: the existence of a general revolutionary socialist tradition or *culture* which imposes its own code of responsibility and comradeship among activists. As Victor Serge pointed out in discussing Bolshevism in his biography *The Life and Death of Leon Trotsky*, the generation of Lenin and Trotsky was a product of decades of incredible, intense, struggle, self-sacrifice, heroism and debate among shades of revolutionary opinion. This entire process culminated in the generation that made the Russian Revolution, in which such giant figures as Lenin and Trotsky could emerge among dozens, hundreds, even thousands of others who were not far less able than they.

This is a far different picture from the squalid and petty factional state of the recent American left. This is only partly the result of the backwardness of American politics and the immaturity of our movement. Internationally, traditions of revolutionary debate, conduct and comradeship which produced a Lenin were virtually shattered (along with so much else) by the murderous Stalinist counterrevolution. What has been left to us is a desert of totalitarian misleadership masquerading as Leninism.

Parties and pseudo-parties have slavishly followed the nationalist interests of foreign bureaucracies in the name of internationalism. Internal democracy became a "deviation." All this has left us (and other revolutionaries inter-

nationally) to reconstruct a new tradition. If it is necessary for us, today, to bend over backwards to emphasize every detail of organizational democracy for the reconstruction of our movement—and I believe this will be a necessity for years to come, even when it seems like an expensive luxury—it is at least partly not because of how "advanced" we now are, but rather because of our whole movement's backwardness.

To complete the discussion of Lenin's alleged "elitism" there remain some important issues regarding Lenin's conception of the relationship of the professional revolutionaries (the *cadres*) to the masses of workers. To deal with these we have to expand the scope of the analysis. This will also lead straight into our discussion of economic and political struggle.

Kautskyism and Beyond

It was Lenin's impressive singleness of purpose which allowed him to embark upon his task and to conclude it. Tirelessly, he was tightening the string of his bow more and more, to the limit—quietly testing: Was there no flaw? No danger that it would snap? From all sides he heard warnings: Do not make it any tauter, don't!

"It will not snap," said the master archer. "Our bow is made of unbreakable proletarian material, and the string has to be tightened more and more, for the arrow is heavy and we have to launch it far, very far into the distance." (Lenin, by Leon Trotsky, Capricorn Books, 1971, pp. 71-72)

Lenin's central political proposition in *What Is To Be Done?* is that with all of Russia's unique features, the debate among Russian revolutionaries was part of an international one. The Russian debate, he insisted, was a direct reflection of the struggle between a revolutionary and reformist trend throughout the socialist movement and above all in Germany.

In fact, it is no secret for anyone that two trends have taken form in present-day international Social-



The murderous repression of the Black Panther Party demonstrated that the capitalist state would stop at nothing to destroy any potentially effective revolutionary movement. This experience helped convince many activists of the need for highly disciplined and committed revolutionary organization.

Democracy. The conflict between these trends now flares up in a bright flame and now dies down and smoulders under the ashes of imposing "truce resolutions." The essence of the "new" trend, which adopts a "critical" attitude toward "obsolete dogmatic" Marxism, has been clearly enough presented by Bernstein and demonstrated by Millerand. (pp. 8-9; Lenin's emphasis)

Much of what the inexperienced reader finds confusing on a first reading of *What Is To Be Done?* can be cleared up if this basic idea is understood. Bernstein was an important figure in the German Social Democratic Party who, especially after Engels' death, developed the theory of an almost infinitely gradual transition to socialism without revolution, in which the growth of trade unions, co-operatives and social legislation would transform capitalism through an accumulation of reforms. "To me, the movement is everything, the final goal nothing," was his way of summing it up. While regularly repudiated by the Party leadership, the so-called "Orthodox Marxist Center," and by each Party convention, Bernstein's conceptions were becoming increasingly popular with the trade union leadership's wing of the party in a very effective process of internal party "gradualism."

Millerand, a French socialist leader, put the conception into practice by joining a French capitalist government as a Cabinet minister at the turn of the century. This act scandalized the international socialist movement, which regarded it as class treason (today, of course, joining the bourgeois government to pressure for reform or "structural change" is the basic strategic goal of practically every social-democratic party, including the "left-wing" ones, and of the larger Western Communist Parties as well).

Taking the German debate as the most important expression of this international split, Lenin put himself squarely on the side of the "orthodoxy" of the German Party's leadership, whose leading theoretician was Karl Kautsky, as the defender of Marxist revolutionary principles against Bernstein. He insisted that the "Economists," those Russian socialists he was opposing, were in essence the Russian Bernsteinians. Once this is grasped, the otherwise confusing section on "Dogmatism and Freedom of Criticism," the first part of the pamphlet, falls into place.

Lenin's opponents hotly denied this proposition. As far as they were concerned, Bernsteinian reformism did not exist in Russia. In their view, they were as intransigently revolutionary as Lenin (and certainly, they were as savagely persecuted as Lenin's supporters). The difference between them and Lenin, they said, was that Lenin was too concerned with "great ideas," with leadership and imposing an all-national structure on the movement, while they themselves were closer to the real workers and their struggles.

Looking backward, one can see that Lenin's view of the debated was filled with political insight. Bernsteinism was no abstract philosophy; it represented the emerging world view of a stratum within the workers' movement,

the trade union bureaucracy. In Germany, while organically affiliated with the Social Democratic Party, the trade union leadership was content to tolerate the party's annual policy debates on when to call a future general strike, and on revolutionary responses to a then-hypothetical imperialist war, intervening only when their prerogatives were threatened by a call for action.

Regardless of the paper resolutions, it was to be the trade union bureaucracy which would accumulate the practical power to mediate the party's day-to-day influence inside the working class, a process that would in 1914-23 turn the workers' party into the most effective instrument of counter-revolution. In Russia, affairs would turn out differently. But Lenin's sarcastic critique of the Economists' supposedly "practical" schemes for the creation of underground unions, with dozens of involved rules for the collection of dues and record keeping, captured not only their absurdity under a dictatorship, but also the narrow and bureaucratic spirit of organization lurking behind them.

Against this trend, Lenin upheld the German Party as the model by which the politics of the working class movement could avoid being debased to the narrow, low-level economic struggle without broader visions. With its hundreds of local and national publications—by 1914 it had 90 *daily* papers (of which 78 were basically identical with local mastheads), two twice-weeklies, two weeklies and 14 special journals—its educational institutions, its sporting associations and its social welfare apparatus, the German Party appeared the ultimate institution for the entire working class to bridge the gap between economics and politics.

In Lenin's own activity and in *What Is To Be Done?* he was explicitly trying to adapt that model to Russian conditions, to underground work, to a situation where the working class was a minority and where other sections of society, especially the peasantry, had their own distinct revolutionary grievances. The working class, in creating its own socialist party, must also be "the vanguard fighter for democracy" among *all* classes. All of Lenin's specific proposals, especially the all-Russian newspaper which he saw as being a first step toward a German-type publishing machine adapted to underground work, were based on taking the Kautskyist model of organization and pushing that model to its absolute limits of effectiveness. This was the spirit in which Lenin was "tightening the bow," as Trotsky puts it in the above quote.

There was, however, a fatal flaw in the model which history was to reveal. As a result, in trying to make the model an effective instrument in a profound revolutionary crisis, Lenin would be forced to break through the limits and transform the model. The German Party was predicated on the assumption of "one party-one class," that is, that one working class party would represent the "natural ideology" and unanimously understood interests of the entire working class. For a more thorough discussion of this concept, and the way in which it was

appropriated from social-democracy by Stalinism for other purposes, a reading of Chris Harman's pamphlet *Party and Class* is recommended. In particular, Harman shows how the Stalinist notion of a party as a body over the working class, claiming to represent the class because of its unique "proletarian ideology," much more closely resembled the core assumptions of Kautskyism than Leninism.

The assumption in its Social-Democratic form overlooked the essential quality of unevenness of the consciousness of the working class itself. Lenin does not discuss this unevenness explicitly, but it is strongly suggested by his stress upon the ways in which the working class can "spontaneously gravitate toward socialism" and yet be trapped by the spontaneous re-generation of bourgeois ideology at the same time. For Kautsky, the uninterrupted flow of working class consciousness toward socialism was inevitable, and the Party was the institutional expression of this inevitable process in the whole working class. A split in the Party was to be avoided at all costs, because it would mean a split in the working class itself which would have fatal consequences. In political life, however, it was the compromises with the reformists this unity-at-all-costs theory demanded that were to prove fatal.

Lenin, in seeking to forge a revolutionary instrument for the Russian working class, was beginning to break through these limits toward a new conception, more revolutionary and in practice *much more democratic*. A revolutionary party could not be the party of the whole working class—and would make no pretense of being the only possible working class party—but the party of the conscious revolutionary *minority* of workers (along with revolutionary intellectuals and activists from other classes who accepted Marxism and the commitment to workers' revolution).

This political conception, as finally to develop in the Bolshevik Party and after 1914 in the attempt to create a new revolutionary International, was *not* to be dependent on whether the party would be legal or illegal. It was to become associated with such ideas as the united front of all workers' organizations against common enemies, the struggle for rank and file organization in the unions, and the alliance of the working class with oppressed peoples both at home and internationally in the national liberation movements. Its high level of discipline and full internal democracy would flow from its members' uniformly high commitment, and the need to support their work and protect them from sharp repression even under legal conditions. Bolshevism, or as it is more often called Leninism, would be the concept of revolutionary workers organizing themselves, in order to more effectively influence the broader layers of workers within the mass (and all too often, heavily bureaucratized) institutions of the labor movement. Ultimately, the revolutionary party would be called upon—in Russia it would succeed, in other countries tragically fail—to lead the working class to power through mass institutions such as workers' councils, which embraced the whole mass of the

workers in reorganizing society and beginning the construction of socialism.

The revolutionary workers' influence in the working class would be won through their role as workplace militants, as trade union fighters and as political organizers armed with strategy and vision. This was the completion of the break with the Kautskyist view which saw working class politics and unity crystallized in a perfect, unbreakable orthodox party center.

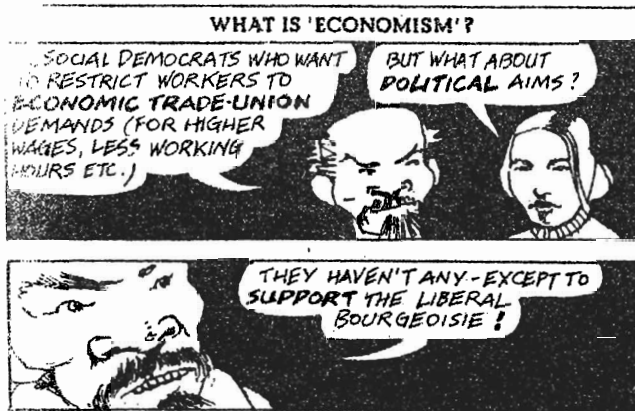
With a party of revolutionary workers, linking together the militants in each workplace, each union, each region of the country, political as well as economic issues could be organized around and demands fought for. Lenin's critique of "Economism" had nothing to do with the idea that economic struggle itself is backward—indeed, it takes for granted that the economic struggle is the daily fact of life that makes all other forms of class struggle possible—but was rather keyed to the understanding that *consciousness* is central for the struggle to move beyond that level. A party without such consciousness would always be dragged backward to its own members' lowest common denominator.

The party-building movement of the 1970s began with more or less these conceptions—distorted to varying degrees by lack of experience, naivete about the dynamics of working class struggle, and Stalinism. The combination of these factors often led to a sectarian, propagandistic inversion of Lenin, the view that rank and file organizing or trade union activity itself was backward and "Economist." This view, which in its more extreme forms counterposed party-building to the daily struggle with quite destructive results, was all the more pervasive because the tiny size of most groups demanded quick results for their organizational survival. But it has been largely dumped by those cadres and groups which survived the process. Today, however, an attack on "Economism" comes from a different direction which requires a brief comment.

Reformist "Anti-Economism"

Not only must Social-Democrats not confine themselves to the economic struggle, but . . . they must not allow the organization of 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. (*What is to be Done?* p.57)

It was once common to hear this quote exercised by tiny party-building groups for whom "the political education of the working class" meant joining their group and little more. Today, much more commonly one hears a different theme, along the following lines: creating working class *political* consciousness means going beyond militant defensive trade unionism and petty, low-level rank and file caucus building. What is needed is to bring workers into political activity through the articulation of



an "alternative economic program" or "structural reforms" of the system. The above quote from Lenin shows that revolutionary socialists who focus on industrial struggle are less political than the structural reformers. (One version of this argument is given in Bob Leff's contribution to an exchange of views on the Democratic Socialists of America, *Changes* July-August 1982).

Now, the general theory that the struggle for socialism begins from an alternative economic model has a long and highly dubious history. Here, however, we are concerned not with a theory of socialism but with a political strategy, which itself has a number of variants. In Britain, the Alternative Economic Strategy is the program of the Bennite left wing of the Labor Party. It is supported both by sections of the trade union movement and by left-wing intellectuals, who have been further heartened by the election of Socialist Party governments in France and Greece.

In America, the structural-reform perspective revolves around such issues as public control of corporate investment, rebuilding declining industrial areas through investment from pension funds, and national economic planning. These have been elaborated on a national scale by some of the more progressive trade union forces, for example in the International Association of Machinists' "Rebuilding America Act." The view that such programs will transform American politics is the core of the vision of a political organization, the Democratic Socialists of America.

The DSA program also links the idea of structural reform to a concrete political strategy - rebuilding the liberal wing of the Democratic Party. It is fatal to separate the structural reform vision from the Democratic Party, to wage an intransigent independent struggle for it, because to do so separates socialists from the real American labor movement. Socialists must be loyal to the Democratic Party because that is the home of the labor leadership, which in turn is there because its own rank and file is.

To be sure, the conflict between revolutionary socialist and liberal-reformist political perspectives ultimately cannot be fought on the terrain of quotes from Lenin or other socialist classics. The perspectives stand or fall on

their own merits. My purpose here is much more limited: to note the irony of using quotes from Lenin to promote reformist politics.

On the surface, today's sophisticated European "alternative strategies" and American "democratic investment" proposals are far from what Lenin and his opponents in the Russian socialist movement were arguing about. I would suggest, however, that there is a direct and extremely close connection, and that to understand it one should look at one particular phrase of the "Economists" on which Lenin heaped considerable abuse.

The Economists' watchword was, "giving the trade union struggle *itself* a political character." Both the phrase, and Lenin's contempt for it, seem confusing at first reading. Don't socialists always seek to introduce politics in the context of the labor movement's struggles? And isn't a huge polemic over one phrase overdoing it in any case?

To understand what was at stake for Lenin, we have to go back to his central political thesis that the "Economist" trend represented the introduction of Bernsteinism into the Russian movement. It meant that socialist politics were to be reduced to what Lenin called "trade union politics," an extension into the political arena of the struggle for decent working and social conditions and labor's right to organize certain kinds of protective societies.

Lenin was for such political struggles, as every socialist must be. Under certain conditions, as he knew well, they could play an exceptionally important role. These "trade union politics" issues, however, were only one part in a much larger field of political action. He reacted violently to the conception that socialist political activity should be *restricted* to simply the political generalization of immediate economic struggle. Indeed, he viewed that phrase as the most concentrated expression of everything that was wrong with the "Economists" in theory, practice and organization.

Today's left social-democratic "alternative economic strategies" are precisely a modern version of "giving the trade union struggle itself a political character." Many of the specific reforms they project are worth fighting for (those which are not protectionist, for example). But the suggestions that these economic structural programs are the centerpiece of socialist politics, that they somehow add up to socialist transformation by degrees or that enough of them put together would make such a transformation irreversible — in short, the standard intellectual arguments for these programs in their "Eurosocialist" forms — are the very essence of "Economism" as Lenin used the term. In their American variant, they are a good deal less than even that.

Among American socialists, and a growing minority of labor activists, it is becoming increasingly understood that the development of a labor party in America would be a tremendous political step forward for the American working class. There is no abstract, pre-

set limit to how politically radical (or conservative) such a party might be. On key issues, and at every step in the struggle for an independent labor party, socialists will seek to present clear left-wing policies. We will urge any movement for a labor party not to restrict itself to the most immediate economic and trade union issues, but to boldly forge alliances with other movements, with the struggles of the oppressed both at home and internationally. Because we are socialists, we will not be bound by the conservatism of the labor bureaucracy and we will urge a labor party to do many of the same things a socialist party would.

Even so, a labor party or labor party movement in America will undoubtedly represent what Lenin calls "trade union politics." Indeed, it will probably not be ideologically socialist in even a reformist way, let alone a revolutionary one. If revolutionary socialists reduced *all* their political activity and their own politics to the struggle for a labor party, it would be another repetition of the mistake Lenin is warning against. If they seek to substitute the politics of a labor party for their own, or vice versa, they will end up acting either as reformists or as sectarian splinters of a mass movement.

Nothing Lenin wrote about Russia in 1902 will serve us as a tactical or strategic recipe for America. But if we look carefully at his underlying political conceptions, at his understanding of how the conscious political work of a revolutionary minority can advance the level of struggle of masses of workers at *all* levels, there is still a great deal to learn.

The question of "Economism," of the submergence of socialist politics into the limits of trade union activity and its direct political extensions, turns out to be a rather complex one. Socialists must be active not only in the unions but also (in America) in the struggle for a *genuine* "trade union politics." It is a central part of our responsibility to push those politics as far as they can possibly go.

Even here, the danger of the kind of conservatism that Lenin labelled as "Economism" — especially the pressure to make damaging compromises with racism, sexism and other forms of backward consciousness — is real. An independent socialist political presence is needed, among other reasons, to combat those pressures. But what is one to say about an American reformism whose political strategy rests on keeping American labor below *even* the level of "trade union politics" — and quotes Lenin against Economism to justify itself??

Some Conclusions

Where does this partial re-examination of *What Is To Be Done?* leave American revolutionary socialists today? In the light of our own recent experiences with disciplined and centralized organizations, with "Leninism" at least as we thought we understood it, is that whole concept of organization useless for our present purposes?

The view of *What Is To Be Done?* I have sketched here is not particularly original; it is essentially based on the

understanding of revolutionary workers' organization and politics that developed within the Internationalist Socialists during the period of the I.S. party-building perspective of the 1970's. The conclusions I will draw also flow to a considerable extent from that experience, although I hope others will find some parallels with their own.

First, I reject the argument that *What Is To Be Done?* or Leninism in general should be abandoned as elitist, inherently anti-democratic, or historically outdated. I have already explained why I consider it the most democratic, as well as revolutionary, concept of a political party that has ever been developed anywhere. And there is no evidence either that the capitalist state can be more readily reformed out of existence, or that any modern working class is more capable of rising up *en masse* to destroy it without organized political leadership and preparation, than was true 80 years ago.

Unfortunately, the chain of argument for specifically Leninist organization in the U.S. today snaps at another key link. As Georg Lukacs observed in his study of Lenin, the Leninist strategy for party organization rested on "the reality of the revolution." That is, Lenin was building the party that would *lead the working class in the course of a revolutionary upheaval whose contours were already visible*. Or as Trotsky expressed it, Lenin

came as a potential leader, as the leader of the revolution which he sensed and perceived was building up. He came in order to build, in the shortest possible time, an ideological base and organizational framework for that revolution. When I spoke about Lenin's tense concentration on his goal — concentration which was both passionate and disciplined... I saw it as a concrete, direct, immediate work toward the practical aim of speeding the outbreak of the revolution and of securing its victory. (Lenin, p.69)

Indeed, throughout Lenin's writings of the period, including *What Is To Be Done?*, the arguments for a deepening revolutionary crisis of the autocracy and its overthrow are forcefully put. And the perspective was not far off. Less than three years separated *What Is To Be Done?* from the outbreak of the Russian Revolution of 1905.

Now, the American party-building left of the 1970s also believed in the "reality of the revolution." Its diverse wings all believed that, whether it was to be under the impact of a romantically conceived spreading Third World revolutionary process, or the threat of world war arising from superpower confrontation, or (in a more orthodox Marxist framework) working class radicalization that would grow from the return of capitalist crises, America was beginning to enter its own "coming revolution."

The only correct response in such a situation was the struggle for a genuinely revolutionary party. The I.S. stated in 1975 — and members of other groups will find their own versions — that within three years we would be a workers' organization of at least a thousand members, the small core of a party, with a strong working class leadership recruited from and experienced in industrial struggle, or that we would be severely set back.

We were, all of us, simply wrong. Whatever our tactical skills or our ability to learn from the working class elements of trade union practice, our experience was too limited and our theoretical equipment too simplistic to correctly read the world around us. The notion that the force of the crisis was sufficient to impel thousands of worker militants "spontaneously" toward socialism, that the conscious political intervention of revolutionaries could recruit those workers to our organizations and develop them rapidly in numbers large enough to proletarianize our movement, the very core of the strategy of *What Is To Be Done?*, was so far off as to look almost ludicrous with hindsight.

Few socialists in America today are making the same mistake again. Today's economic crisis is in every respect worse than 1974-5, yet we are not anticipating short-term revolutionary developments. The crisis of today's left can only be resolved by learning how to function as revolutionary socialists in a period which we know is *at best* reformist, not just now but for a substantial period ahead of us, and where the emergence of revolutionary prospects in the future depend on developments in the working class on which our own influence will be small. Small — *but possibly quite significant. How do we organize ourselves to meet the responsibilities open to us?*

If the argument to this point is sound, it follows that Leninist organization for the present period is *wrong*. Wrong, because democratic centralism exists for one and only one purpose, the construction of a genuine revolutionary workers' party, which in turn exists for the sole purpose of organizing the working class to take power. That means the bulk of the organization's activity is inside the working class, and wins to it substantial numbers of working class militants, including working class members of the oppressed communities. Unless all the daily, patient, boring work of revolutionary socialists is seen by the organization's cadre as serving the practical, active goal of organizing that party inside the working class, the level of discipline and centralism required for Leninist organization is more likely to destroy political unity than to safeguard it. The guiding principle, that all members are equally and fully responsible for carrying out decisions of the organization even if they disagree, works only within definite limits.

Socialist activists are not automatons, just as rank and file workers are not. Maintaining the commitment of the already organized activists to a disciplined and centralized organization, as well as recruiting working class militants to it, depends centrally on having a perspective that works. If the perspective ceases to work, if contrary to predictions the recruitment of workers to revolutionary politics in substantial numbers is not possible, if it turns out that the revolutionary group is unable to deliver on the promises of rapid growth it has made to those workers it does recruit — then many of the advantages of democratic centralism turn into drawbacks.

Every political difference, even a tactical one, tends to become factional. Members' willingness to subordinate



Solidarity Day: American labor, still politically chained to the Democratic Party, needs to create a genuine "trade union politics"—as well as a socialist vision that sees even further.

Jim West

many secondary issues to the primary task of party-building rapidly vanishes if that primary goal itself no longer inspires confidence. At the same time, an attempt to artificially sustain party-building methods in a period where party-building is *objectively* unworkable creates sharp conflicts between the "conscious planning" of the organization's apparatus and its own members' rank and file or community work.

Soon, the organization is faced with the choice of abandoning party-building and centralism, or suffering endless factionalism in a context of deeper and deeper isolation from real struggles. The I.S. made the choice to drop party-building and centralism in 1978 after suffering serious losses, and other groups or individual activists either made the same choice or had it made for them as their organizations collapsed.

Yet even today, while some aspects of the organization Lenin outlined are unattainable, there are certain important qualities of that organization that we can strive for. A disciplined and democratic political machine, linking the active militant leadership of workplace struggles, cannot be built now. We do, however, want to organize practical vehicles for working together, and to create the best possible means for socialist activists in the labor movement to exchange experiences and ideas. We do need socialist organization that to the maximum extent possible, "goes among all sections of the people" with socialist politics. We do need to build the kind of comradeship and mutual confidence which Lenin heavily stressed. We must seek ways of doing this through a multi-tendenced form of organization, rather than emphasizing the maximum ideological agreement that enables a party-building organization to move quickly yet flexibly.

Such organization requires compromises: not only the kind of compromises that take place in negotiating principles of unity, but deeper and more serious ones. In certain key respects, a broad socialist organization, even one committed to basic revolutionary ideas, will find it much more difficult to draw a sharp line in practice between reformist and revolutionary politics. It will also be less ef-

fective, and quite a bit less fully democratic, than a genuine Bolshevik party would be. More to the point, however, it will be a great deal more effective and democratic than the toy Bolshevism of sterile sects, and infinitely preferable to the atomization of activists that occurs as the sects disintegrate.

Most important of all, how do the political tasks of socialists today relate to the kind outlined in *What Is To Be Done?* Here, all the blueprints fade and we are going to have to do some very hard original and creative thinking.

Lenin's arguments against reducing politics to the level of "factory exposures" were addressed to a movement which had years of rich and intense experience in making such exposures. This experience is described powerfully in Tony Cliff's *Lenin, Vol. 1 (Building the Party)*, in the chapter which discusses the movement's turn in the mid-1890s away from narrow educational circles to broad agitation. Today's left, though it includes activists with years of workplace experience, remains on the whole extremely primitive in its basic understanding even of working class economic struggle. While a parallel between the American left and the Russian movement of, say, 1894 would be misleading, our movement cannot claim to have achieved the level of expertise in economic struggle to allow us to polemicize against fetishizing it.

At the same time, Lenin was writing in a situation where all trends of Russian socialism, including its proto-reformist wings, were underground. Elementary trade union organizations need to be built clandestinely, from scratch, and Lenin devoted considerable space to arguing how revolutionaries could create broad, loose union organizations with secret, tight leadership. Today, socialist labor activists necessarily devote their time to legal, open work in existing mass trade unions, or organizing the unorganized into these unions. As for Lenin's general statements about the correct relationship between the party and the unions, which he said in general "ought to be as close and uncomplicated as possible," based on the German model of party leadership of the unions, this has absolutely no application to our present circumstances.

Similar unique combinations of elements of advanced and backward consciousness and organization arise when one discusses the American working class. Its level of trade union organization is advanced — at least, advanced enough to make it worth the employers' while to wage a massive drive to cripple it. At the level of political consciousness, however, its attachment to bourgeois political institutions, its lack of class independence, today's American working class is quite substantially more backward than the Russian working class of 80 years ago.

This backwardness finds its reflection within the "mainstream" American left, where certain of these bourgeois institutions, in particular the Democratic Party, are discovered to be (in DSA leader Michael Harrington's phrase) "a labor party in disguise" because

workers vote for it. As I have mentioned above, we sometimes even hear Lenin on the importance of political struggle quoted back to us to justify labor's, and more to the point, socialists', subservience to the party of liberal imperialism.

It is these combinations of circumstances, more than the immediate severity of the economic crisis, which seem to determine the major responsibilities for American socialists in the period ahead. Bluntly put, it is not, and cannot be, a struggle for revolution. Nor can it be a struggle for a revolutionary party. It is a struggle for basic class independence, a struggle to be waged both in ideas and in organization, for reviving union activism and militancy, for rank and file democracy, for a labor party. Many other critical areas of work which socialist activists must be active in — the women's movement, national minority struggles, solidarity with liberation movements, disarmament and others — will be more effective to the extent they can be strategically connected with the struggle for independent working class politics.

The strategic goal of "independent working class politics" is something less ambitious and somewhat less clearly defined than Lenin's perspective of the "all-Russian uprising against the aristocracy." It is also much less clear as a political guide to socialist organization. There are few well-tested guidelines as to how to modify the tight political agreement, and uniformly high level of commitment, needed to build a workers' revolutionary party to a period where the sights must be set lower. The period will require revolutionaries of rather diverse backgrounds and experience to forge, not full ideological unity and a highly disciplined party, but unity in action through their common commitment to the struggle for independent politics in the American working class.

Through this struggle, socialists can help to prepare the American labor movement for major class confrontations, so that those confrontations are not the "one-sided class war" that Doug Fraser has complained about. Out of those confrontations, if they do not end in catastrophic working class defeats, revolutionary prospects can in fact emerge in America.

Such prospects would demand a much higher, more disciplined kind of socialist organization, which I believe would be much closer in conception to the party outlined in *What Is To Be Done?* than was objectively possible in the 1970s, or today. The concrete necessity and possibility of creating that kind of party will, itself, have to be foreseen by theory well before a full-scale revolutionary crisis. No revolution yet has been successful where the task of building a revolutionary party had to begin the same day the revolution itself broke out.

However, the chances of success are even less if the left marches into the future in the bedraggled state in which it entered the 1980s. We need a socialist organization and a perspective that fits us to meet today's responsibilities and tomorrow's, not only the more distant future's. Such an organization is an urgent necessity and those who want our revolutionary politics to be effective had better get to work on it now. □