

***Reading Guide (With Answers) “Left-Wing” Communism: An Infantile Disorder**

This document is intended to be a resource for you in leading the discussion to go over the reading guide. It's not intended as a script.

In What Sense We Can Speak of the International Significance of the Russian Revolution

1. What is the main purpose of the first section?

ANSWER: Lenin is establishing that a) the Russian Revolution has an impact on the entire global class struggle and b) that it has affirmed the international validity of revolutionary Marxism. Those who deny this fact have abandoned and betrayed the revolutionary essence of Marxism.

At the same time, you'll note that Lenin is restricting the meaning of “international significance” to these two things alone. Apart from the “fundamental features of our revolution,” the Russian Revolution CANNOT simply be copied by those in advanced capitalist societies who admire it, and he suggests that a revolution in such a country, once completed, would become the new model instead of Russia. He expands on these ideas in subsequent chapters.

2. Why does Lenin include the excerpt from Kautsky?

ANSWER: Lenin is writing this pamphlet primarily to win over the ultra-left in Western Europe to a correct understanding of tactics. The ultra-left at this time are militant supporters of the Russian Revolution and militant opponents of reformism and opportunism, as personified by Kautsky. While the vast majority of Lenin's writings are aimed at the reformists and opportunists, this pamphlet is directed against the ultra-left for choosing tactics that unintentionally strengthen the opportunists rather than weaken and defeat them. He is polemicizing against the ultra-left in harsh terms throughout the pamphlet, and especially their narrow interpretation that the Russian Revolution was made by simply being the most radical and disciplined. Even though he is harsh, he uses this introduction to show that he is with them in completely rejecting reformism as the main enemy. That is why he targets Kautsky.

The quote exposes that Kautsky, the leader of German Social- Democracy, once admitted that Russia had the most “revolutionary initiative” in Europe and that revolution there was destined to “break the ice of reaction” and help unleash revolution in Western Europe. Now when history has confirmed Kautsky's earlier prediction, he and the rest of the opportunists who play leading roles in the workers parties, are running from this conclusion, saying they shouldn't have seized power, and telling the workers of their own countries to not strive for the dictatorship of the proletariat.

An Essential Condition of the Bolsheviks' Success

3. What two reasons does Lenin give for the Bolsheviks' success (their retention of state power)?

ANSWER: He says it was the absolute centralization and the rigorous discipline of the proletariat.

He then turns to the question of how such discipline is developed? It is not enough to say to workers "be disciplined"; that is learned from the conditions of struggle itself.

4. What three answers does Lenin give to the question: How is the discipline of the revolutionary party maintained, tested, and reinforced?

ANSWER: 1) the class-consciousness of the proletarian vanguard, its devotion to the revolution, tenacity, self-sacrifice and heroism. 2. The Party's ability to link up, maintain the closest contact, and merge with the "broadest masses of the working people" 3., "correctness of the political leadership" political strategy and tactics, "provided the broad masses have seen, from their own experience, that they are correct."

It is worth reading these three points again and taking a moment to think about them — especially the third one. The Party cannot simply declare its tactics as correct; they have to be tested in reality, and an essential part of that test is that the "broad masses" are won over to them.

5. At what point does revolutionary theory assume its final shape?

ANSWER: Lenin says it takes place "when it [revolutionary theory] is in close connection with the practical activity of a truly mass and truly revolutionary movement." This is a complicated phrase, of theory assuming its "final shape." Another way of putting it is its "highest form," when theory and practice are really welded together by the Party itself, functioning as part of a much larger revolutionary movement. A "truly mass" and living revolutionary movement is necessary for revolution to be a practical possibility; without such a movement it is inevitable that the revolutionary theory of the Party will be incomplete.

The Principal Stages in the History of Bolshevism

6. In this section Lenin divides the 15 years of "practical history" the Bolsheviks went through that allowed them to succeed. What are they?

ANSWER: It is essential for all revolutionaries to understand that the Bolsheviks forged their internal discipline, and ultimately won the loyalty of the proletariat, through each of these successive stages. The ultra-left, Lenin is saying, just looks at the October insurrection and says "let's do that." By going through each period of the Bolsheviks' development, we do so not to copy each stage but to understand the tactical flexibility and prolonged period of intense struggle in so many forms that the Party had to endure together to really build up "Bolshevik discipline." List each period and its significance. (Principal stages in the history of Bolshevism)

- The years of revolution (1905–07). The "dress rehearsal". Origination of Soviet form and the party's first experience with it; the Soviet form came not from the Party, but from the class
- The years of reaction (1907–10) Learning how to retreat in the most orderly fashion, learn to work in reactionary organizations

- The years of revival (1910–14) Bolshevik’s growing successes in this period based on ability to combine legal and illegal work.
- The First Imperialist World War (1914–17) Ability to withstand the tidal wave of opportunism and patriotism in the workers’ movement, even if it meant being forced underground, and then the ability to retain the basic organization with its anti-war program even under conditions of illegality.

The Working-Class Struggle Against which enemies within the movement helped Bolshevism Develop, Gain Strength and Become Steeled

7. Why were the “Left” Bolsheviks expelled from the Party in 1908?

ANSWER: In 1908 the "Left" Bolsheviks were expelled from our Party for stubbornly refusing to understand the necessity of participating in a most reactionary ‘parliament.’” They clung to the “boycott” idea from 1905, when it was the right thing to do, but by 1908 the conditions were different and calling for boycott was no longer the correct tactic. ... :”The Bolsheviks' boycott of "parliament" in 1905 enriched the revolutionary proletariat with highly valuable political experience and showed that, when legal and illegal parliamentary and non-parliamentary forms of struggle are combined, it is sometimes useful and even essential to reject parliamentary forms. It would, however, be highly erroneous to apply this experience blindly, imitatively and uncritically to other conditions and other situations.”

8. What about the 1906, 1907, and 1908 boycotts of the Duma (the national legislature)? Were these correct? Why or why not?

ANSWER: The Bolsheviks, boycott of the Duma in 1906 was a mistake although a minor and easily remediable one. The boycott of the Duma in 1907, 1908 and subsequent years was a most serious error and difficult to remedy, because, on the one hand, a very rapid rise of the revolutionary tide and its conversion into an uprising was not to be expected, and, on the other hand, the entire historical situation attendant upon the renovation of the bourgeois monarchy called for legal and illegal activities being combined.

9. Other than social-chauvinism, what was the Bolshevik’s other enemy within the working-class movement?

ANSWER: The other enemy was petty-bourgeois revolutionism (in other words, adventurist ultra-leftism and semi-anarchism). These trends had long dominated the Russian revolutionary movement in the late 1800s and early 1900s, organized around direct action and assassinations of ruling class figures. These trends were popular among agrarian radicals and urban intellectuals. (Lenin’s own brother was part of one such group). But they had been defeated by the tsar despite their heroism. Marxism took off in Russia in its critique of these trends, and the growth of the Russian working class showed another way towards a revolution (even a “bourgeois-democratic revolution” to overthrow tsarism and feudalism). A group called the Socialist Revolutionaries inherited the tradition of petit- bourgeois revolutionism, and in the course of World War I it developed a Left and Right wing (which then split into different parties over the October Revolution).

10. What were the Bolsheviks' three critiques of the Socialist-Revolutionaries?

ANSWER: They refused to understand the need for a strictly objective appraisal of the class forces and their alignment before taking any political action. Second, this party considered itself particularly "revolutionary", or "Left", because of its recognition of individual terrorism, assassination. Third, while the Socialist-Revolutionaries thought it very "Left" to sneer at the opportunist sins of the German Social-Democratic Party, they themselves imitated the extreme opportunists of that party on the agrarian question, or on the question of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Should Revolutionaries Work in Reactionary Trade Unions

11. Where does Lenin say communists must absolutely work?

ANSWER: Lenin says "wherever the masses are to be found." Of course the revolutionary party must be based on the most dedicated, principled and class-conscious members of the working class — and its top priority is to win over such organic and natural leaders — but the party must seek to influence and move all strata, including backward elements in the working class and workers who waver politically between different camps.

12. Could the proletariat develop without unions, and what role do they play in the development of class consciousness and a revolutionary movement?

ANSWER: Lenin describes unions as organizations that represent the "transition from the workers' disunity and helplessness to the rudiments

of class organisation." While it is true that they reveal "certain craft narrow-mindedness, a certain tendency to be non-political, a certain inertness" — and thus appear insufficiently radical from the standpoint of revolutionary socialism — they are indispensable organs for building class-consciousness and class organization, for drawing even backward workers into a class perspective, and ultimately to help the working class understand their potential to become the new ruling class of society.

Insofar as masses of workers are drawn into reactionary unions, Lenin mocks the idea of splitting from them to build smaller revolutionary pure unions. Revolutionaries must be creative inside the existing unions to combat the opportunist, petit-bourgeois and reactionary leaders, and try to guide the unions in a new way. This does not mean mistaking the role of unions — which are not organizational vehicles to make revolution, but to improve workers' conditions, impart class consciousness and teach class organization.

13. What example of working in a reactionary union does Lenin give?

ANSWER: Lenin describes in the period of extreme reaction, how Bolsheviks had to find ways to work in workers' bodies led by the Black- Hundreds, which were semi-fascist monarchists and extreme Russian chauvinists, tied to the police agencies, and responsible for mob violence against Jews and ethnic minorities.

"Under tsarism we had no 'legal opportunities' whatsoever until 1905. However, when Zubatov, agent of the secret police, organised Black- Hundred workers' assemblies and workingmen's societies for the purpose of trapping revolutionaries and combating them, we sent members of

our Party to these assemblies and into these societies (I personally remember one of them, Comrade Babushkin, a leading St. Petersburg factory worker, shot by order of the tsar's generals in 1906). They established contacts with the masses, were able to carry on their agitation, and succeeded in wresting workers from the influence of Zubatov's agent.”

Should We Participate in Bourgeois Parliaments?

14. What is the difference between parliament being obsolete in a propaganda (political) sense vs. the practical sense?

ANSWER: In other words, sure, Parliamentarism is obsolete in the same way capitalism is— we no longer need it, the objective conditions exist for us to move to the next phase, and we should say that. But in a practical and political sense, we are not on the verge of a revolution that will overturn capitalist relations nor begin a revolution. One major reason is that what Lenin calls “bourgeois-democratic prejudices” (the notion that the current system is fundamentally democratic and that “one person, one vote” is the highest form of political rule) still dominate the thinking and daily lives of the great majority of the working class. So capitalist parliamentarism is still very much alive in the working class, and therefore a factor in the world that we must deal with, that involves millions of workers. Lenin says that until we can do away with bourgeois parliaments, we’re obligated to work within them for the purpose of educating backward strata of the working class. “Otherwise you risk turning into nothing but windbags.”

15. How did the Bolsheviki relate to the Constituent Assembly before and after the October Revolution?

ANSWER: This is important because the “Left” communists point to how the Bolsheviki dismissed the Constituent Assembly right after the October Revolution. They did this on the basis that the new workers’ state represented a higher form of political rule than the Constituent Assembly convened on the basis of bourgeois-democratic rule. The “Left” communists in Europe argued essentially, “We should do the same as the Bolsheviki and dismiss bourgeois-democratic institutions. Lenin says ‘not so fast’ — “One sometimes feels like telling them to praise us less and to try to get a better knowledge of the Bolsheviki's tactics.”

The fact is that the Bolsheviki participated in the Constituent Assembly elections just a few weeks before the revolution. “The point is not whether bourgeois parliaments have existed for a long time or a short time, but how far the masses of the working people are prepared (ideologically, politically and practically) to accept the Soviet system and to dissolve the bourgeois-democratic parliament (or allow it to be dissolved). ... it has been proved that, far from causing harm to the revolutionary proletariat, participation in a bourgeois-democratic parliament, even a few weeks before - the victory of a Soviet republic and even after such a victory, actually helps that proletariat to prove to the backward masses why such parliaments deserve to be done away with; it facilitates their successful dissolution, and helps to make bourgeois parliamentarism ‘politically obsolete’.”

No Compromises?

16. What are two kinds of compromises that Lenin distinguishes between?

ANSWER: Compromises that are necessary for survival (letting the bandit take your wallet and

car, even if he uses to commit another crime) vs. actually collaborating with the bandit—engaging in treachery and opportunism.

Later Lenin gives as an example of the end of a strike: every worker “sees the difference between a compromise enforced by objective conditions (such as lack of strike funds, no outside support, starvation and exhaustion) -- a compromise which in no way minimises the revolutionary devotion and readiness to carry on the struggle on the part of the workers who have agreed to such a compromise -- and, on the other hand, a compromise by traitors” or cowards who end a strike because they’ve been bought out or are too ready to yield.

17. Between 1903-1912, what compromise did the Bolsheviks make? How did they approach that compromise in practice?

Let’s review one quote at length:

Since 1905 [the Bolsheviks] have systematically advocated an alliance between the working class and the peasantry, against the liberal bourgeoisie and tsarism, never, however, refusing to support the bourgeoisie against tsarism (for instance, during second rounds of elections, or during second ballots) and never ceasing their relentless ideological and political struggle against the Socialist- Revolutionaries, the bourgeois-revolutionary peasant party, exposing them as petty-bourgeois democrats who have falsely described themselves as socialists. During the Duma elections of 1907, the Bolsheviks entered briefly into a formal political bloc with the Socialist- Revolutionaries. Between 1903 and 1912, there were periods of several years in which we were formally united with the Mensheviks in a single Social-Democratic Party, but we never stopped our ideological and political struggle against them as opportunists and vehicles of bourgeois influence on the proletariat.

ANSWER: So the Bolsheviks had shifting compromises and political blocs during this period but included being formally united with the Mensheviks in one party, as well as forming a political bloc with the SRs. But in practice, they never ceased their ideological and political struggle against even these temporary allies, so as to win workers away from the opportunists and vehicles of bourgeois influence within the movement. The tempo and tenor of this ideological struggle changed in each period, but the Bolsheviks always fought to fortify the revolutionary outlook within the workers’ movement.

18. During the October Revolution the Bolsheviks entered into another compromise. What was this, and how did they approach it in practice?

ANSWER: “At the very moment of the October Revolution, we political bloc with the petty-bourgeois peasantry by adopting the Socialist-Revolutionary agrarian programme in its entirety, without a single alteration.”

The Bolshevik agrarian program had long been for socialized/nationalized agriculture, with collective farms, to raise the productive level and build class consciousness among the peasantry. The SR’s program was “land to the tiller,” which reflected the peasants’ existing consciousness and demand — that is, the demand to own the land as small proprietors. The Bolsheviks had long polemicized against this. But in the revolutionary crisis of 1917, caused fundamentally by the peasantry and soldiers (peasants in uniform) deserting and rebelling against the war in mass, the Bolsheviks recognized that no revolution could be won without winning the confidence of the peasants — to show that the Bolsheviks wanted to reach agreement with the peasants, not to “steamroller” them. They thus adopted amid the revolutionary crisis in entirety the agrarian program of the SRs (the main peasant party). As a consequence, in October 1917, the SRs split in

two parties — the “Left” supporting the Bolsheviks and the “Right” supporting the liberal Provisional Government (and later joining the counter-revolution). The Left SRs dissolved the bloc a year later after the treaty of Brest-Litovsk, and the Left SRs also subsequently launched armed actions against the Bolsheviks.

“Left-Wing” Communism in Great Britain

19. Lenin gives a shortened formula for what is required for a revolutionary crisis. What is it? What does this have to do with the point of the pamphlet?

ANSWER: “It is only when the ‘lower classes’ do not want to live in the old way and the ‘upper classes’ cannot carry on in the old way that the revolution can triumph.”

This is critically important because it makes clear that a revolutionary party cannot create a revolutionary crisis (although of course its own conduct can and should point in this direction.) But such a situation does not come about just because we really want it to happen.

Several Conclusions

20. Is propaganda alone enough to bring about a revolution? If not, what else is needed?

ANSWER: Reviewing the focus of Bolshevik work in different periods, he explains that propaganda was the priority insofar as it was “a question of winning the proletariat's vanguard over to the side of communism.”

“But,” he continues, “when it is a question of practical action by the masses... of vast armies, of the alignment of all the class forces in a given society for the final and decisive battle, then propagandist methods alone, the mere repetition of the truths of “pure” communism, are of no avail.”

For the question of an actual revolutionary movement, “one must not count in thousands, like the propagandist belonging to a small group that has not yet given leadership to the masses; in these circumstances one must count in millions and tens of millions. In these circumstances, we must ask ourselves, not only whether we have convinced the vanguard of the revolutionary class, but also whether the historically effective forces of all classes — positively of all the classes in a given society, without exception — are arrayed in such a way that the decisive battle is at hand.”

21. What makes for such a real revolutionary possibility?

ANSWER: Lenin lays out three conditions, which go far beyond the attitude or readiness of the revolutionary party itself: “(1) all the class forces hostile to us have become sufficiently entangled, are sufficiently at loggerheads with each other, have sufficiently weakened themselves in a struggle which is beyond their strength; (2) all the vacillating and unstable, intermediate elements — the petty bourgeoisie and the petty-bourgeois democrats, as distinct from the bourgeoisie — have sufficiently exposed themselves in the eyes of the people, have sufficiently disgraced themselves through their practical bankruptcy, and (3) among the proletariat, a mass sentiment favouring the most determined, bold and dedicated revolutionary action against the bourgeoisie has emerged and begun to grow vigorously. Then revolution is indeed ripe; then, indeed, if we have correctly gauged all the conditions indicated and

summarised above, and if we have chosen the right moment, our victory is assured.”

22. What is “the fundamental law of all great revolutions?”

ANSWER: See question 23. Also It follows that, for a revolution to take place, it is essential, first, that a majority of the workers (or at least a majority of the class-conscious, thinking, and politically active workers) should fully realize that revolution is necessary, and that they should be prepared to die for it; second, that the ruling classes should be going through a governmental crisis, which draws even the most backward masses into politics (symptomatic of any genuine revolution is a rapid, tenfold and even hundredfold increase in the size of the working and oppressed masses -- hitherto apathetic -- who are capable of waging the political struggle), weakens the government, and makes it possible for the revolutionaries to rapidly overthrow it.

23. Lenin identifies “only one thing” the communist movement is lacking (at this time, the early 1920s) to make progress towards revolution. What is it?

ANSWER: “Only one thing is lacking to enable us to march forward more confidently and firmly to victory, namely, the universal and thorough awareness of all Communists in all countries of the necessity to display the utmost flexibility in their tactics.”

24. What are the main 3 lessons you draw from this text as it relates to you?

ANSWER: We need not be afraid of participating in liberal and even very backwards organizations and movements if that is where workers are congregating so long as we are clear on what we are doing.