

Left-wing communism: An infantile disorder

Facilitator's discussion guide with suggested answers

Questions should be asked by facilitator. While questions are open-ended, we have listed some possible answers in italics to assist discussion leaders in keeping the discussion on track. Where applicable, prompt participants to give examples from your local area. The suggested answers are provided as a resource to discussion leaders.

1. What do you typically think of when you think of discipline? (This question is accessing prior knowledge or in this case, prior misconception or popular understanding of the term "discipline." Our purpose in asking is to help members distinguish between the popular understanding of the term and our specific, Marxist-Leninist understanding.)

following orders, being well behaved, being punished

Is this what Lenin has in mind when he talks about discipline?

(No)

How does Lenin define discipline throughout the book? –

democratic centralism necessary to achieve a revolution, working together in an organized fashion under varying conditions. Base tactics on the needs of the objective conditions, not our desires, steadfastness vs. frenzied, subjective reaction to events

c. Ask for an example

2. Lenin divides the Bolsheviks' practical experience.

a. What do the non-revolutionary periods have in common?—

use of both legal and illegal tactics

b. What do the revolutionary periods have in common?—

discipline and close contact with working class

3. How did the Bolshevik Party relate to unions, including *reactionary* ones?

join and participate, recruit and influence the workers in them.

What other kinds of organizations does this have relevance for? (Be specific and give examples)

Pretty much any other kind of org that has members of the working class in it (local examples)

What do we lose by not participating in these organizations

We leave those workers to be under the influence of reactionary or liberal leadership

Given all that Lenin has said about working in reactionary organizations, what approach should we take to events like the Women's March or the March for Our Lives?

We should participate and try to meet and influence people, based on our local resources

4. Throughout the struggle in Russia, how did the Bolsheviks reach out to the masses?

participating in every aspect of workers' struggle and with publications

5. In part VII, when discussing Germany, Lenin writes that “the ‘Lefts’ in Germany have mistaken *their desire*, their politico-ideological attitude, for objective reality.” What does he mean by this?

It's like wishful thinking. Because you want the conditions to be different, you act as if the conditions are the way you wish they were.

What would this look like? [Ask for examples.]

Why might it be tempting to mistake our desire for objective reality?

Because the reality that a mass revolutionary movement does not yet exist can be discouraging for revolutionaries. It is understandable to be impatient about this. Things are terrible now, capitalism is clearly obsolete NOW.

How can we guard against this mistake?

We have to maintain the vision, program and living desire for revolution while maintaining a close contact and integration with the working class so we are always basing ourselves in a realistic assessment of where people are at, in terms of moods, consciousness and organizational level. We also must follow closely the capitalist system and its ruling class so we can anticipate and take advantage of their own internal contradictions that weaken their rule. Ultimately, we ground our revolutionary optimism in our study of history, namely how the consciousness of tens of millions of people can shift quickly, and how revolutionary possibilities present themselves that seemed impossible shortly beforehand.

How do we maintain close contact and integration with the working class?

There is no single answer to this question and of course the working class itself is divided socially and politically. A whole variety of organizations in fact represent different segments of the working class, and most of these are under petit-bourgeois or even bourgeois political leadership. Very rarely does a pure, revolutionary organization of workers present itself. Lenin made the point that the Party must struggle to always retain its link with the working class despite these misleaders — so much so that the Bolsheviks even clandestinely joined Tsarist-chauvinist unions when the socialist-led unions had been crushed. Where the bourgeois misleaders close the door to communist participation, he argued, the Party should find a way in through the back window — if there are workers there that the Party wants to win over.

6. Lenin writes that “revolutionary tactics cannot be built on a revolutionary mood alone.” What does he mean by this? Why is it important?

Without a popularly held revolutionary mood of course there can't be revolutionary tactics. But even when the masses have a revolutionary mood, that doesn't necessarily mean it's time to launch an insurrection. There needs to be a revolutionary crisis, where the ruling class itself is paralyzed, divided among itself and cannot find a way out of the crisis.

7. In the book Lenin distinguishes between different kinds of compromises and gives examples of their difference. What are some key examples?

Lenin makes the point that there were times where the Bolsheviks signed joint declarations with opportunist forces in the workers' movement, even where the declaration didn't go as far as they thought was necessary. That is one type of compromise. They signed a surrender of huge swaths of territory to end the World War I, because the alternative was to be wiped out by German invasion. That is another type of compromise. In 1917 they even adopted the agrarian program of another party to create a political bloc which they considered essential to make the revolution and retain power. That is another type of compromise. And in a sense, everything short of socialist revolution is a compromise of some sort.

Can we formulate a rule concerning compromises?

Not really, not in terms of tactics, because politics creates so many varied political situations. It is contradictory to formulate a strict rule about when it's ok to make a compromise.

Lenin considered the a compromise unprincipled and opportunist if it "sacrifices the permanent and essential interests of the party to momentary and minor interests." The most essential interest of all is to safeguard the revolutionary Marxist outlook and to keep up the fight against bourgeois ideology in the workers movement.

What is our role in making such a determination?

As a Party we need to assess the circumstances carefully each time. This is why it is so essential to have a membership with both a firm grasp of Marxist theory and experience in the struggle, and to develop leaders at every level who can make decisions about what compromises are necessary and productive, and which are not.

8.How should communists relate to "liberal" organizations and individuals?

Some individuals we can win over. For instance, in some areas a liberal organization like MoveOn might be the only political activist group in town. We should try to meet people who might be looking for something more radical. We also can form alliances around specific issues with liberal groups, for instance to support a strike, defend abortion rights, counterprotest fascists, oppose war and so on.

Can you think of a current example of such a group?

NGOs in general, women's march, march for our lives (local examples),

What would it look like to relate to them in such a way?

Do outreach, figure out how to collaborate on issues and projects. .

9. What does it mean to say “politics is a science and an art that does not fall from the skies or come gratis”?

There are no easy rules or recipes for politics.

10. What are the difficulties of being a revolutionary in non-revolutionary times?

We can see what needs to be done to change society for the better—we can see that the system is obsolete—but conditions are not ripe for toppling the capitalist state and so we must lay the groundwork and wait, and that can be frustrating.

(Third discussion session starts here)

11. Jigsaw activity

- a. In small groups, comrades read documents which exemplify the Party’s application of these principles in recent years. Each small group reads one document and reports back to whole group about what it says and how it relates to the principles of LWCAID (this jigsaw approach will work well in face to face discussions. For online discussion groups of at-large members, we may need to modify this activity)
 - i. Bernie Sanders movement <https://www.liberationnews.org/socialist-tactics-bernie-sanders-campaign/>
 - ii. military issue memo, available as PDF
 - iii. critique of KKE <https://www.liberationnews.org/greece-shift-left-class-struggle-communist-tactics-statement-psl/>
 - iv. Gun violence article <https://www.liberationnews.org/united-states-violence-socialist-approach-student-walkouts-gun-control/>
 - v. Same sex marriage (or memo on disrupting Pride Marches--this document is shorter and more recent)
<http://liberationschool.org/resolution-of-the-party-for-socialism-and-liberation-marriage-equality-and-what-it-means-for-the-lgbtq-struggle/>

Guide for reading and reporting back:

Name of document:

Context/issue being addressed:

What is the example of “ultra-leftism” presented in the document?

What approach is counterposed to the ultra-left approach?

12. What concluding lessons can we draw from this text as it relates to our work?

- a. Ask comrades to individually think of a few and write them down.
- b. After a few minutes, have comrades turn to the person next to them to discuss. (skip this step in skype/Zoom based discussions)
- c. Have comrades share out.
- d. Write a list reflecting