

SECTION IV CONTINUED: SECOND AND THIRD WEEKS -- THE PARTY

I. Purpose of Study

Having considered the basic analysis of ruling class political and ideological power--the State and hegemony--last week, we now turn to a study of the basics of proletarian political and ideological struggle. Our focal point for the current study is the theory of the revolutionary proletarian party. Our study of the party (and this study guide) will cover two weeks.

The organizers of this study group want to put particular emphasis on the study of the party; we feel that this subject is crucial for US Marxist-Leninists today. The reason for this is simply stated; there is no revolutionary proletarian party in this country presently, and we are participating in the first stages of the protracted struggle to build one.

It has been several decades since an organization existed in the US that had the potential of becoming a real communist party of the working class. This vacuum has severely limited the gains made by the working class and the popular masses in this period--particularly during the multi-faceted mass upsurge of the late 60's and early 70's. In the wake of this upsurge, the need for a new revolutionary party became clear to some activists, and a series of attempts to construct such a party followed. However, the sad fact is that the resulting "communist parties" (and more are threatening to emerge soon) can never be more than sects, because they are saturated with dogmatism. This dogmatism has manifested itself in the very founding of these "parties", for this act was based on the ultra-leftist belief that a "proletarian vanguard party" can be proclaimed into existence without first developing a strong base in (ie, "fusing" with) the most advanced sector of the US working class.

While dogmatism and ultra-leftism have prevailed in the party-building movement to this time, this is not the whole story. In our opinion, a new trend is beginning to develop that is committed to avoiding the errors of the dogmatists without falling into the reformist neo-liberalism that characterizes the old Communist Party USA. We feel that this embryonic trend could result, over time and struggle, in a new "genuine" communist party in this country. And, to be frank, we want to win people in this study group to participation in the "trend".

But the point that we want to underline here is that the fate of the "anti-dogmatist/anti-revisionist party-building trend" rests to a large degree on how well its participants gain a deep understanding of the general nature and function of the party, on our ability to creatively shape this understanding and apply it to the unique historical situation that we face. In a sentence, because of all of the above reasons, we want to urge the study group participants to make a special effort to study the material for these two weeks.

II. Special Problem: Reading Lenin on the Party

The bulk of our readings for the next two weeks is selections from Lenin's work on the party. This presents us with a special problem: as some people discovered last week with State and Revolution, Lenin can be very difficult to understand. Because there are difficulties that are particular to the selections that we are reading from

Lenin, we want to discuss these here in order to facilitate the readings. We want to start this discussion by addressing a prior question: why are we reading so much Lenin on the party? There are three basic reasons. First, Lenin and the Bolsheviks were the first to develop fully, and to apply successfully, the essentials of a comprehensive Marxist theory of the revolutionary party. And Lenin's writings contain these essentials in an extremely rich and dialectical form. Secondly, Lenin's writings on this subject are classic. All subsequent historical materialist writings on the party draw heavily on Lenin. Moreover, the current US party-building debate uses Lenin as its major focal point. Thirdly, while writings on the party since Lenin draw on him, they interpret him in a wide variety of ways. To put it bluntly, many seriously distort his analyses--some "dogmatize" him, some attempt to dilute the revolutionary essence of his ideas.

To sum up: To understand the Marxist-Leninist theory of the party, you must understand Lenin on the subject. And to understand Lenin's analyses, you must read Lenin himself.

Now to discuss the difficulties with reading Lenin on the party, and to suggest some "remedies". Most of the difficulties that people usually encounter are related to one central fact: Lenin's writings on the party tend to be "practical" writings, writings that were produced to address particular historical conjunctures that are long past. Because Lenin was so thoroughly immersed in an exceptionally revolutionary political struggle, he never found the time to write a systematic general overview of the theory of the party that he and the Bolsheviks were evolving. So all that we have are, again, his "practical", and often polemical, writings.

This often results in a number of problems. For instance, Lenin's writings tend to be studded with references to then-contemporary events, organizations, and political figures, with which we are unfamiliar. Also, since he mainly dealt with concrete, particular situations, it is sometimes unclear how much of what he argues was applicable only to the particular situation, and how much is generally valid. And because his writings were often done under extreme time limitations (see for example his frequent apologies for being unable to revise, or even finish an essay), he sometimes used "old" terms in "new" ways, without clearly saying so. Or he put forth a partial formulation, seemingly without realizing it, then implicitly completed and qualified it pages, or even chapters later. Lastly, the nature of a sharp polemical debate sometimes led Lenin "to bend the stick" too far in the opposite direction (as he later said of What is To Be Done?--WITBD--), in order to emphasize his disagreements with his opponents.

The best way to alleviate problems with unfamiliar names and references in Lenin is to develop a broad sense of the historical context of the work in question, while reading it. This can be done in a number of ways. Most editions of Lenin's essays have editorial footnotes and introductions that provide some historical background; these should be used. Also, some sense of the historical context can be gained by reading the text "symptomatically"--that is, by looking consciously for historical clues. Furthermore, we have provided sketches of the relevant historical background later in this study guide in hopes of making the reading easier.

It must be stressed that one must avoid getting hung up on trying to understand every historical detail--something that is

impossible within the limits of this study group and likely to lead to demoralization. We don't need to know precisely what every reference refers to. For example in WITBD?, it is not necessary for our purposes to know specifically what and who Rabocheye Dyelo, the Credo, and Martynov were; it is necessary to get a sense of what the "Economist" trend that they participated in was. Lenin must be read strategically, and the reader must constantly try to sift the "necessary" from the "unnecessary".

Much the same can be said about the problem of deciding what in Lenin is generally applicable--and thus broadly applicable to our situation--and what was particular to his day and time. This too depends on developing a sense of the historical context. This is not usually as hard as it sounds, for Lenin frequently makes the conditions for a particular judgement pretty clear. For example, when he speaks of the need for a strong emphasis on secret, highly disciplined party organization in WITBD?, he constantly links this to the particular conditions of the Russian Absolutist State.

Finally, to deal with the problem of Lenin giving new content to old concepts, and to gain proper perspective on polemically sharp statements, the reader must pay attention to the implicit definitions and qualifications that Lenin makes, not just the explicit and apparent ones. For example, at the beginning of Chapter 2 of WITBD?, Lenin states his famous thesis on the relation of the workers' movement to the socialist movement. If one simply reads the terms he uses, and assumes that their meaning is apparent, it seems that Lenin is arguing that there is something intrinsic to the working class that will always prevent it from developing "socialist consciousness" by "itself", that the working class can "spontaneously" achieve no more than "trade union consciousness", which is a form of "bourgeois ideology". He seems to propose that socialism can only be developed by "bourgeois intellectuals", and then imposed on the working class from "outside". Such a reading makes Lenin appear incredibly elitist and to contradict the basic Marxist thesis that the socialist revolution can only occur under the leadership of the working class. Furthermore, attempts to use such a reading as a guide for socialist practice would tend to lead to isolation from the proletariat.

However, throughout Chapter 2 (and indeed the rest of the book), Lenin continually returns to his original statement, reworks it, illustrates it, specifies it, and qualifies it. By paying attention to his continual re-discussion of his basic point, by noting the definitions that he gives to terms such as "spontaneous", "by itself", "outside", etc., it becomes clear that Lenin's meaning is very far from the apparent elitism of his first statement--and quite in line with the basic premises of historical materialism.

One final word: we should all remember that Lenin, like any great thinker, cannot be "completely understood" on a first, or a second, or a third (etc., etc.) reading. Lenin is a writer that we will return to again and again throughout our political lives. What we are aiming for here is a general introductory understanding. And we do have our discussion sessions to iron out collectively some of the problems that we have from our individual reading.

#### THE FIRST WEEK

### III. The Readings for the First Week



The readings for the first week are selections from Lenin's What Is To Be Done? (WITBD?) and his essay "Reorganization of the Party." The purpose of this section of the study guide is to give a sketch of the historical background to these works, and provide some guidance as to what is most important in them. Space demands that we do these things as briefly as possible. We want your feedback as to how helpful this is.

What is To Be Done? (1902) was written by Lenin as a long summation of the positions put forth by Russian socialists grouped around the newspaper ISKRA, during the period of the formation of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party. (Revolutionary socialist parties throughout the world in this era identified themselves as "Social Democratic). Although the RSDLP had been formally founded in 1898, it was far from consolidated in 1901-02. It was rather an umbrella organization, comprising a number of localized and exile groups, and a number of divergent tendencies.

During the process of theoretical debate and ideological struggle toward a unified party, a division between two trends emerged: the so-called "Economist" trend and the trend represented by Iskra, Zarya, and Lenin. WITBD? is both a statement of the views of the latter trend, and a criticism of those of the former. In the selections that we are reading, Lenin deals with the relationship of socialism to the working class, to all popular classes, and the question of the nature of the party. These are the things that people should especially look for when doing this part of the reading.

To further aid the reading, it might be helpful to delve a bit further into the general historical context of Russia in these years. Russia was not a fully capitalist country, but was characterized by extreme uneven development. The great bulk of the Russian population still lived on the countryside under conditions of semi-feudal exploitation by the Russian landed aristocracy. However, in the prior three decades, and in sharp contrast to the stagnation of the countryside, a vigorously expanding industrial capitalism had emerged in the cities, and the latter was characterized by gigantic, "socialized" units of production.

Politically and ideologically, though, late feudalism still held dominance. The form of the Russian State was that of Tsarist Absolutism--or as Lenin called it "the autocracy". Bourgeois-democratic rights for the masses were unknown. Absolutism defended the interests of the aristocracy, and de facto of the bourgeoisie, through repression and medieval religious mystification.

Russia's place in the international capitalist world was likewise complex. It was "imperialized" by advanced Western European capitalism. Yet it was imperialist, subjugating a plethora of nations in the Russian Empire, and thirsting after greater expansion.

Finally, in terms of the class struggle: the peasantry was extremely dissatisfied and prone to intermittent explosion, but unable to mount coordinated, sustained struggle. The proletariat, though no more than 10% of the population, was throwing off the influence of the reigning semi-feudal hegemonic ideology, and searching for its common class interests through a recurring and aggressive series of strike waves (which, since strikes and trade unions were illegal, were met with violence). And though the bourgeoisie was weak and tended to

tail the aristocracy, certain sectors of the bourgeoisie (and especially of its intelligentsia), had grown disillusioned with absolutism and foreign imperialist penetration and moved to a variety of forms of liberalism, radicalism, and revolutionism.

The echoes of all of these historical circumstances can be found in What is To Be Done?

The second reading for this week is "Reorganization of the Party" which can be reviewed quickly. By 1905, when this essay was written, many of the conditions summarized above still maintained, with two important exceptions. First and foremost, the Russian Revolution of 1905 was sending shock waves throughout the social system that left the aristocracy and bourgeoisie reeling. In an attempt to contain the situation, the Absolutist State had extended (temporarily as it turned out) certain democratic liberties to the masses. Secondly, the RSDLP was then a fully-formed party, though a new split had emerged within it that was to have important long-term effects. (This was the split between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks.)

In this essay, Lenin addresses the question of internal party structure and procedure, the relationship between the party leadership and rank-and-file, and the party and the masses, under the new situation. The major importance of this essay is that Lenin addresses these questions in a situation different from that of 1902, and it allows us to put his ideas in WITBD? in better historical perspective, and to sift what is particular from what is general.

#### THE SECOND WEEK

#### IV. The Readings for the Second Week

To complete our study of the theory of the party, we have chosen readings from the works of three authors, two of whom are "classical", and one of whom is contemporary. Below is a brief discussion of each in the order that they should be read.

##### A. Selections from Lenin's "Left-Wing" Communism:

Like WITBD?, Lenin's "Left-Wing" Communism, an Infantile Disorder (LWC) is one of the truly basic texts on the Marxist theory of the party. In it Lenin draws on the experience of the Bolsheviks to propose some general rules for the proletarian revolutionary struggle. His central concern is party tactics as a crucial aspect of the process of fusing communism with the working class and the masses. In the selections that we are reading, he discusses the proper tactical approach to the trade unions, to the bourgeois parliament, and to the question of alliances and compromises. His major focus is the period prior to the proletarian seizure of State power, though he is constantly making references to lessons learned after the Russian October Revolution. The above, then, are the main things to concentrate on when reading LWC.

Reading LWC should be less difficult than reading WITBD?, although it does have a somewhat similar "practical" and polemical character. The main difficulty with LWC is probably the numerous historical references, especially names of people and organizations. It is simply impossible to review all of these here, but a short sketch of the historical context should help in identifying the main historical theme.

LWC was written in March and April of 1920. By this time the Russian proletariat and its ally, the peasantry, had taken State power under the leadership of the Bolsheviki in the October Revolution of 1917. The Bolsheviki had, since 1912, been a fully independent party, and the remaining Mensheviki, who had first formed a separate faction within the old RSDLP as early as 1903, were weak and were arrayed against the proletarian revolution. Despite very difficult circumstances, the Russian Revolution had by 1920 achieved an initial consolidation. A proletarian State system was in construction on the basis of Soviet power (Lenin reviews the structure of this in LWC). The competing bourgeois State institutions that had appeared during the earlier February Revolution of 1917, such as the Constituent Assembly, had been disbanded. And the counter-revolutionary "White Russian" armies (led by Kolchak and Deniken), and the allied imperialist invasion, were all but defeated through the process of a costly Civil War.

Internationally, and especially in Europe, the post-World War II class war still raged, though it was starting to wane. Hopes still ran high that a series of successful socialist revolutions were imminent. The process of dividing the revolutionary socialists from the various opportunist forces, and organizing the former into their own parties, had begun as early as 1916 and was continuing. As Lenin points out in LWC, the international ranks of the opportunists were much more diverse than the relatively homogeneous forces led by the Mensheviki in Russia. They included not only revisionists and "social chauvinists" (those forces in the old Socialist International that chose national chauvinism over proletarian internationalism, and supported the war effort of their particular nations, at the outbreak of World War I,) but also trade union leaders, and other reformists. And the newly re-constituted revolutionary socialist and communist parties were organizing themselves into a new international organization--the Communist International founded in 1919--to coordinate the struggle internationally.

Lenin wrote LWC to address a particular problem in the developing international communist movement, and, as he explicitly says, he was aiming it at certain forces in Western Europe. In over-reaction to the "treachery" of right-wing trade union leaders, parliamentary socialists, and reformists, an important wing of the Western European movement was moving to the "ultra-left". These ultra-leftists, or "Left Communists" as Lenin called them, tended to combine a rigid, puristic, dogmatic attitude toward practice, with a subjectivist revolutionary enthusiasm (as Mao would say). The dangerous result was a sectarianism that was separating them from the masses. Above all, Lenin wrote LWC to defeat international ultra-leftism, and convince the "Left" Communists (whom he regarded as comrades) of their errors.

#### B. Mao's "Some Questions Concerning Methods of Leadership"

In this readable and concise essay, Mao discusses the nature of "leadership" in two related spheres: in the party itself, and between the party and the masses. Although he doesn't say so in as many words, this essay represents a scientific overview of two forms that proletarian democracy--real democracy for the masses--can take in social formations dominated by capitalist and pre-capitalist modes of production. The names that historical materialism usually gives to these two forms (again Mao does not use them in this essay) are democratic centralism (in the party) and the mass line (party/masses).

This essay is most famous for its discussion of the concept of the mass line, a concept that is an important contribution of Mao and the Chinese Communist Party to the corpus of historical materialism. To say this however, is not to say that the ideas embodied in the mass line were unknown to Marxism-Leninism before Mao. In particular, many of the elements of the mass line can be found in Lenin's work, especially in his discussions of the fusion of communism with the working class. Moreover, the ideas of the mass line were always implicit in the theory and practice of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Gramsci, and of the trends in the socialist movement that they represented.

The only danger with the essay (as with so much of Mao's writings) is that, because of its simplicity of style and brevity, the reader may mistakenly think that its contents are simple. To guard against this danger, we suggest that while studying this essay, an attempt be made to concretize Mao's analysis in terms of our own concrete experiences. Also, since Mao takes both the role of leadership and the necessity for popular initiative very seriously, his ideas should be contrasted with those of bureaucratic centralism on the one hand, and of consensus-style "participatory democracy" on the other. Finally, we suggest that Mao's discussion of the relation of the party to the masses be compared with Lenin's discussion of this in WITBD? and LWC.

#### C. Selection from Charles Bettelheim:

Charles Bettelheim is a French Marxist-Leninist who has been politically and theoretically active since the 1930's. His most recent theoretical work, for which he has become internationally known, has focused on the nature of socialist society as a transition between capitalism and communism. He is an ardent supporter of the thesis that capitalism has been restored in the USSR, and recently broke with the Hua Kuo Feng-Teng Hsiao Ping leadership in China, identifying the latter as "revisionist". But regardless of whether one supports, questions, or opposes the particular conclusions about the USSR and China that Bettelheim makes, it is our feeling that there is much to learn from his work.

The short selection that we are reading from Bettelheim's work, is an excerpt from his Class Struggles in the USSR: The First Period, 1917-23. This book is the first of several projected volumes in which Bettelheim plans to examine the history of the class struggle in the USSR, and analyse the period from the October Revolution to the present.

Our selection, however, does not directly deal with the problem of the USSR. It is a concise theoretical summation, and to a degree an extension, of one facet of the Marxist theory of the party: the relationship between inner-party "ideological struggle" and "correct political line." In his extremely systematic overview of this problem, he places it in its proper relation to both the direct practice and experiences of the party, and to the "basic principles of revolutionary Marxism". In doing all of this, Bettelheim offers the most systematic answer that we have yet encountered to a question raised by a member of our study group some weeks ago: "How do you know which line is correct and which is incorrect?"

In addition, the selection from Bettelheim raises several other points that should not be missed. The reader should be alert for Bettelheim's discussion of the following: the principle of "going against the tide" and the role of the party majority, the process of

rectification and criticism/self-criticism, the question of the "undeclared opposition", the function of democracy in democratic centralism, and definition of "bourgeois" and "proletarian" lines within the party.

D. Mao's Combat Liberalism:

In "Combat Liberalism" Mao deals with many of the ideas that we have already encountered on the nature of the party and of communist practice. However, he deals with these from a very different angle. Essentially Mao is sketching a communist code of ethics or morality in contrast to morality of (bourgeois) "liberalism". It is not too much to say that, according to the general Marxist-Leninist theory of the party, communist morality must prevail within, and thoroughly permeate party life, if the party is to be proletarian in character. However, this statement surprises many people who erroneously think that "scientific socialism" means the end of all codes of ethics and morality.

V. The Discussion for the Second Week

Our suggestions for the course of the discussion group are simple. We suggest that we review the main arguments of each of our readings in the order that they are dealt with above. The previous section of the study guide broadly identifies the parameters of the main arguments of each reading. Problems with historical references and context should only be raised to the extent necessary to get out the main arguments; if there is time (which is unlikely) these problems can be taken up at the end. Also the main ideas of each reading should be compared with related ideas in the previous readings in an effort to come up with some general principles. Lastly, through criticism/self-criticism we should thoroughly review the readings and discussions for the whole three-week section on politics and ideology (including the study of both the State and the party).