

IHSP

Modern History

- Full Texts
- Multimedia
- Search
- Help

Selected Sources Sections

- Studying History
- Reformation
- Early Modern World
- Everyday Life
- Absolutism
- Constitutionalism
- Colonial North America
- Colonial Latin America
- Scientific Revolution
- Enlightenment
- Enlightened Despots
- American Independence
- French Revolution
- Industrial Revolution
- Romanticism
- Conservative Order
- Nationalism
- Liberalism
- 1848 Revolutions
- 19C Britain
- British Empire History
- 19C France
- 19C Germany
- 19C Italy
- 19C West Europe
- 19C East Europe
- Early US
- US Civil War
- US Immigration
- 19C US Culture
- Canada
- Australia & New Zealand
- 19C Latin America
- Socialism
- Imperialism
- Industrial Revolution II
- Darwin, Freud, Einstein
- 19C Religion
- World War I
- Russian Revolution
- Age of Anxiety
- Depression
- Fascism
- Nazism
- Holocaust
- World War II
- Bipolar World
- US Power
- US Society
- Western Europe Since 1945
- Eastern Europe Since 1945
- Decolonization
- Asia Since 1900
- Africa Since 1945
- Middle East Since 1945
- 20C Latin America
- Modern Social Movements
- Post War Western Thought
- Religion Since 1945
- Modern Science
- Pop Culture
- 21st Century

IHSP Credits

Internet Modern History Sourcebook

Vladimir Ilyich Lenin:

What is to be Done, 1902

In this text, Lenin makes his argument for a coherent, strictly controlled party of dedicated revolutionaries as a basic necessity for a revolution. Some have seen an analogy with the Jesuit Order in his proposals for an elite corps to lead the masses. One may see in Lenin's proposals a deep insight into to necessary requisites for a revolution, or a deep contempt for the working classes.

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.* it may itself realise the necessity for combining in unions, for fighting against the employers and for striving to compel the government to pass necessary labour legislation, etc. The theory of socialism, however, grew out of the philosophic, historical and economic theories that were elaborated by the educated representatives of the propertied classes, the intellectuals. According to their social status, the founders of modern scientific socialism, Marx and Engels, themselves belonged to the bourgeois intelligentsia. Similarly, in Russia, the theoretical doctrine of Social Democracy [*Note: By "social democracy" Lenin means revolutionary political Marxism, not the later concept of "moderate" socialism*] arose quite independently of the spontaneous growth of the labour movement; it arose as a natural and inevitable outcome of the development of ideas among the revolutionary socialist intelligentsia. At the time of which we are speaking, *i.e.*, the middle of the nineties, this doctrine not only represented the completely formulated programme of the Emancipation of Labour group, but had already won the adherence of the majority of the revolutionary youth in Russia.

It is only natural that a Social Democrat, who conceives the political struggle as being identical with the "economic struggle against the employers and the government," should conceive of an "organisation of revolutionaries" as being more or less identical with an "organisation of workers." And this, in fact, is what actually happens; so that when we talk about organisation, we literally talk in different tongues. I recall a conversation I once had with a fairly consistent Economist, with whom I had not been previously acquainted. We were discussing the pamphlet *Who Will Make the Political Revolution?* and we were very soon agreed that the principal defect in that brochure was that it ignored the question of organisation. We were beginning to think that we were in complete agreement with each other-but as the conversation proceeded, it became clear that we were talking of different things. My interlocutor accused the author of the brochure just mentioned of ignoring strike funds, mutual aid societies, etc.; whereas I had in mind an organisation of revolutionaries as an essential factor in "making" the political revolution. After that became clear, I hardly remember a single question of importance upon which I was in agreement with that Economist!

What was the source of our disagreement? The fact that on questions of organisation and politics the Economists are forever lapsing from Social Democracy into trade unionism. The political struggle carried on by the Social Democrats is far more extensive and complex than the economic struggle the workers carry on against the employers and the government. Similarly (and indeed for that reason), the organisation of a revolutionary SocialDemocratic Party must inevitably *differ* from the organisations of the workers designed for the latter struggle. A workers' organisation must in the first place be a trade organisation; secondly, it must be as wide as possible; and thirdly, it must be as public as conditions will allow (here, and further on, of course, I have only autocratic Russia in mind). On the other hand, the organisations of revolutionaries must consist first and foremost of people whose profession is that of a revolutionary (that is why I speak of organisations of *revolutionaries*, meaning revolutionary Social Democrats). In view of this common feature of the members of such an organisation, *all distinctions as between workers and intellectuals*, and certainly distinctions of trade and profession, must be obliterated. Such an organisation must of necessity be not too extensive and as secret as possible.

I assert:

1. that no movement can be durable without a stable organisation of leaders to maintain continuity;
2. that the more widely the masses are spontaneously drawn into the struggle and form the basis of the movement and participate in it, the more necessary is it to have such an organisation, and the more stable must it be (for it is much easier for demagogues to sidetrack the more backward sections of the masses);
3. that the organisation must consist chiefly of persons engaged in revolutionary activities as a profession;
4. that in a country with an autocratic government, the more we *restrict* the membership of this organisation to persons who are engaged in revolutionary activities as a profession and who have been professionally trained in the art of combating the political police, the more difficult will it be to catch the organisation, and
5. the *wider* will be the circle of men and women of the working class or of other classes of society able to join the movement and perform active work in it....

The active and widespread participation of the masses will not suffer; on the contrary, it will benefit by the fact that a "dozen" experienced revolutionaries, no less professionally trained than the police, will centralise all the secret side of the work-prepare leaflets, work out approximate plans and appoint bodies of leaders for each urban district, for each factory district and to each educational institution, etc. (I know that exception will be taken to my "undemocratic" views, but I shall reply to this altogether unintelligent objection later on.) The centralisation of the more secret functions in an organisation of revolutionaries will not diminish, but rather increase the extent and the quality of the activity of a large number of other organisations intended for wide membership and which, therefore, can be as loose and as public as possible, for example, trade unions, workers' circles for self-education and the reading of illegal literature, and socialist and also democratic circles for *all other sections of the population*. etc, etc We must have *as large a number as possible* of such organisations having the widest possible variety of functions, but it is absurd and dangerous to *confuse those with organisations of revolutionaries*, to erase the line of demarcation between them, to dim still more the masses already incredibly hazy appreciation of the fact that in order to "serve" the mass movement we must have people who will devote themselves exclusively to Social Democratic activities, and that such people must *train* themselves patiently and steadfastly to be professional revolutionaries.

Aye, this appreciation has become incredibly dim. The most grievous sin we have committed in regard to organisation is that *by our primitiveness we have lowered the prestige o revolutionaries in Russia*. A man who is weak and vacillating on theoretical questions, who has a narrow outlook who makes excuses for his own slackness on the ground that the masses are awakening spontaneously; who resembles a trade union secretary more than a people's tribune, who is unable to conceive of a broad and bold plan, who is incapable of inspiring even his opponents with respect for himself, and who is inexperienced and clumsy in his own professional art-the art of combating the political police-such a man is not a revolutionary but a wretched amateur!

Let no active worker take offense at these frank remarks, for as far as insufficient training is concerned, I apply them first and foremost to myself. I used to work in a circle that set itself great and allembreacing tasks; and every member of that circle suffered to the point of torture from the realisation that we were proving ourselves to be amateurs at a moment in history when we might have been able to say, paraphrasing a wellknown epigram: "Give us an organisation of revolutionaries, and we shall overturn the whole of Russia!"

Source:

From, V.I. Lenin: "What is to Be Done?", *Lenin: Collected Works* Vol V, pp. 375-76, 451-53, 464-67

This text is part of the [Internet Modern History Sourcebook](#). The Sourcebook is a collection of public domain and copy-permitted texts for introductory level classes in modern European and World history. Unless otherwise indicated the specific electronic form of the document is copyright. Permission is granted for electronic copying, distribution in print form for educational purposes and personal use. If you do reduplicate the document, indicate the source.

No permission is granted for commercial use of the Sourcebook.

(c)Paul Halsall Aug 1997

The **Internet History Sourcebooks Project** is located at the [History Department](#) of [Fordham University](#), New York. The Internet Medieval Sourcebook, and other medieval components of the project, are located at the [Fordham University Center for Medieval Studies](#).The IHSP recognizes the contribution of Fordham University, the Fordham University History Department, and the Fordham Center for Medieval Studies in providing web space and server support for the project. The IHSP is a project independent of Fordham University. Although the IHSP seeks to follow all applicable copyright law, Fordham University is not the institutional owner, and is not liable as the result of any legal action.