

Lenin and the Trade Union Movement

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This is a republication of the 1924 pamphlet issued by the Trade Union Educational League, which contains a preface that reads:

“Organize! Join the Trade Union Educational League. This is a system of informal committees throughout the entire union movement, organized to infuse the mass with revolutionary understanding and spirit. It is working for the closer affiliation and solidification of our existing craft unions until they have been developed into industrial unions. Believing that all workers should stand together regardless of their social or other opinions, it is opposed to the common policy of radical and progressive-minded workers quitting the trade unions and starting rival organizations based upon ideal principles. That policy is one of the chief reasons why the American labor movement is not further advanced. Its principal effects are to destroy all radical organization in the old unions and to leave the reactionaries in undisputed control.

The Trade Union Educational League is in no sense a dual union, nor is it affiliated with any such organization. It is purely an educational body of militants within existing mass unions, who are seeking through the application of modern methods to bring the policies and structure of the labor movement into harmony with present day economic conditions. It bespeaks the active cooperation of all

militant union workers. For further details apply to
The Trade Union Educational League.”

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Foreword

The appearance of this booklet by Losovsky, pointing out, a few of the great contributions made by Lenin towards the working out of revolutionary policies and tactics in the field of trade unionism, is especially timely. It is just what, American revolutionaries stand badly in need of. A widespread distribution and reading of it will greatly strengthen, the understanding and tone of our movement.

Lenin was indisputably one of the very greatest of all revolutionists. As a theorist, strategist, and organizer he was a master. No matter to what task he turned his brilliant mind and boundless energies he stood out as a supreme authority. His contributions to the better understanding of the problems of the State, the role of the Communist Party in the revolution, imperialism, the peasantry, and many other knotty questions confronting the working class on, its long, hard journey to emancipation, are well known to the rank and file of the revolutionary movement throughout the world. But his work in the trade union field is not so well known. Yet, in this field he was also a master. He was the greatest, theoretician on the role of the trade unions that the revolutionary movement has yet produced.

The whole international labor movement has been profoundly influenced by Lenin's conception of trade unionism. Even the United States has not been exempt. Here in fact, deep and far-reaching effects have resulted from the adoption of the principles and tactics of trade union work that were evolved by Lenin. The capitalists of America and their loyal agents, the trade union bureaucracy, have a real grievance against Lenin. His brilliant mind did much to make more effective the left wing forces in the American labor movement.

One of the greatest services of Lenin to the American left wing trade union movement was to help it rid itself of that deadly leftist sickness manifesting itself as dual unionism. For many a year this had kept the left wing in the unions in a state of almost complete impotency. The left wing had hardly the faintest understanding of the real nature of the conservative mass trade unions and it had the wildest misconceptions of the tactics to be pursued regarding them. For a full generation the left wing stood on the un-Marxian position that the trade unions were practically a conspiracy against the working class engineered by Gompers and his cronies in conjunction with the employers. They were considered as essentially capitalist organizations towards which the attitude of the left wing had necessarily to be one of violent opposition.

The idea that these bodies were the first primitive attempts of the workers to develop a resistance to capitalist exploitation were scouted, likewise the idea that the trade unions could ever be developed into real proletarian organizations.

Basing their tactics upon such fundamental misconceptions, the left wing militants, for a full generation, devoted their energies to the hopeless task of building new trade unions on ideal lines. Many disastrous effects resulted from this grievous error. One was that the trade unions were almost completely abandoned to the control of the ultra-reactionary Gompers machine, who misled, sold out, and miseducated the millions of workers under their control to their heart's content. Another serious result was the fact that, because of their isolation from the unions, the left wingers never took the lead in the mass struggles of the workers. They never gained the prestige over the workers nor the practical skill in leadership which can come only from such participation in the great strikes and other movements of the workers against their exploiters.

In these days, when dual unionism is looked upon properly as a species of infantilism in revolutionary tactics, it is difficult to realize the extreme intensity with which the dual union obsession gripped the minds of American revolutionaries for many years. But I for one had bitter experience with it

for a full decade. I found it to be simply unshatterable. The general conception of dual unionism was accepted as one of those things that had been fully demonstrated by theory and long years of practice. It was virtually impossible even to stir up a discussion on the subject. Arguments that revolutionists should and must work in the trade unions were met with a dismissing wave of the hand and the matter was ended.

But the issuance of Lenin's famous pamphlet "*Left-Wing*" *Communism: an Infantile Disorder* marked the beginning of the great change. Lenin made one smashing, irresistible attack upon the utopian dual unionists. It simply ruined them. They have never recovered from it till the present day, and they never will. He gave the whole left wing trade union movement of the world a new conception of trade unionism and work among the conservative masses. He dealt the dual union idea a death blow. Only those cling to it now who are still unacquainted with the principles of Leninism as applied to trade unions.

Under Lenin's withering assault the dual unionists of the left wing movement of the world retreated in disorder. In the United States their forces practically broke up altogether. And the United States was the real stronghold of dual unionism. Almost like a flash, the truth of Lenin's penetrating analysis came

home to American revolutionists. The sophistries of dual unionism, whose great spokesman was DeLeon, crumbled away. At the present time probably in no other country are the revolutionaries so awake to the fallacies of dual unionism and so alive to the correctness of Leninistic tactics in the trade unions as in the United States, formerly the very home of dual unionism and all the sectarian conceptions which went with it.

For about four years now the left wing has been following the tactics and principles of Leninism in the trade unions. The great growth in power and influence of the Workers Party and the Trade Union Educational League in the struggles of the workers is ample proof of their correctness. To organize revolutionary groups within the mass trade unions to work untiringly for a Policy of class struggle as against one of class collaboration, to take the lead of the rank and file masses in all their struggles against their employers and the union bureaucracy,—these are Leninistic policies which are building the left wing movement in the United States.

Our experiences have taught us conclusively that the old-time arguments of the impossibility of working within the ultra-reactionary A. F. of L. unions are fallacious. Despite the most desperate efforts of the bureaucrats in the Needle Trades Unions, the Miners, the Carpenters, the Machin-

ists, and many other unions to break our influence by expelling us wholesale, we have managed to hang onto the masses and to exercise a tremendous influence over them. But better than our victory over the bureaucrats is our victory over ourselves. Even under the most desperate pressure and provocation, with our militants being expelled wholesale from the unions and blacklisted from the industries, they have not yielded to the gilded sophistries and “easy solutions” of dual unionism. Leninism has taught the left wing how and where to fight, and has inspired it to carry on this fight in the face of the bitterest hardships and handicaps. Every revolutionist who hopes to become a factor in the trade union movement and the whole struggle of the working class for emancipation must become acquainted with Lenin’s great work in the field of trade unionism.

- William Z. Foster,

1924

Lenin and the Trade Union Movement

I.

IN reading Lenin's works, in examining the fruits of his thirty years of activity, one comes to see that what Vladimir Ilyich has done represents an integral whole, and that only conditionally can any individual question be extracted from it and viewed in its horizontal sections. In order clearly to understand Lenin's attitude towards the trade union movement, his approach towards its various issues and tasks, we must consider primarily the conditions of the time when Lenin appeared as a political figure. He entered on the scene in the nineties, when in Russia the trade union movement was just beginning to dawn and the leaders of the Russian labor movement were confronted above all with the question of how to set into motion the laboring masses which alone had the power to destroy the main evil, autocracy.

Lenin's initial stand on questions connected with the trade union movement should be viewed

primarily from the angle of the historical position of the labor movement of Russia in the early nineties. We would be mistaken to think that Lenin's views on trade union questions underwent no changes during the 25-30 years of his activity. This would have meant that Lenin learned very little from the constantly growing class struggle. Lenin not only taught, but studied as well. He saw the processes in the labor movement which were obscure to the rank and file and even to many of its leaders. While making a certain prognosis and frequently foreseeing events, he learned from these events. A correct analysis of the events, an ability to draw lessons from them and to find a basis for class action, were the most characteristic peculiarities of Lenin's political genius.

With the growth of the spontaneous economic struggle, the widely scattered circles of revolutionary Marxists became more and more acutely confronted, at the end of the nineties, with the question of what their attitude towards this spontaneous struggle must be and how a plan and a conscious purpose were to be infused into it. The early attempts to create a party, an organized whole, out of the scattered Social Democratic Marxian groups, the first attempts to weld together the various Marxists scattered throughout Russia who were fighting the old populist groups, culminated in the First

Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Party, which took place at Minsk, in 1898. This congress laid the foundation for the party out of which later grew the Russian Communist Party. These initial attempts to gather the scattered groups of Social Democrats on a national, All-Russian scale, to get them together on the basis of a definite program, to draw concrete conclusions from the work that had been carried on by the separate circles; these attempts met with a series of difficulties which constituted the basis for the future developments within the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, the formation of various tendencies within it and the crystalization of that tendency which became known under the name of Bolshevism.

What were the issues of the struggle of the late nineties and of the early years of the twentieth century, following upon the first congress? What questions agitated the revolutionists who laid the corner stone of the revolutionary illegal party? It was the question of the attitude of the Social Democratic circles towards the strike movement, how to utilize this movement, how to utilize the illegal sick benefit funds, what forms the illegal work was to take. It was only after the Russian Social Democratic Party had been formally created that there began to develop and take shape within its womb various tendencies, which ultimately constituted themselves into an op-

portunist wing of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, on the one hand, and a revolutionary wing on the other.

II.

In order to get a clear conception of Lenin's views upon the labor movement of that period, when a political and economic movement was gradually evolving out of it, we must turn to his main work of that time, written at the end of 1901, and at the beginning of 1902, the book entitled, *What Is to Be Done?* In the early part of the twentieth century we had within the Social Democratic Party two basic tendencies: One, the economists, and another which could be briefly called the politicals. The economists of that time put forward the following conception: In the process of the economic struggle the labor movement produces a class conscious vanguard whose task consists of always keeping pace with the spontaneously developing mass economic movement and marching gradually and slowly onward with this movement, that is, limiting the labor movement to the tasks which the new spontaneous movement of the masses puts before it. On the other hand, the tendency of the politicals who had as their chief nucleus the "Group for the Liberation of La-

bor,” together with the new, the second generation of Russian Social Democrats, and later the newspaper “Iskra” (The Spark) which was directed by Plekhanov, Lenin, Martov, Deutch, Vera Zasulich and Potresov (the association of these names sounds rather strange today), waged a determined, relentless struggle against the economists, against the degradation of the revolutionary struggle to its spontaneous aspect, to use Lenin’s expression. In the polemic with the economists, in the fight against the degradation of the struggle, in the attempts to define the role and tasks of the few Social Democratic groups which represented class conscious nuclei, there was formed and welded together that tendency which gave rise to the Bolshevist Party. In his book, *What Is to Be Done?* Lenin raises the question of the relation between the element of consciousness and spontaneity in the labor movement.

What on the whole, were the tremendous strikes, the strikes of the latter part of the nineties and the beginning of the 20th century which shook autocracy to its very foundation? They began by riots, by spontaneous actions which were gradually adjusted to the every day demands of the workers, involving an ever-increasing number of workers. Thus the spontaneous movement of the working masses was developing into a struggle against the employers and later against the autocracy. All these

spontaneous actions dovetailed with the political line which was being developed both within the working masses and in those organizations of the revolutionary intelligencia who were working side by side, and gradually lining up and welding themselves together with this spontaneous movement. Lenin, in fighting the economists, came out sharply against the idea of trade unionism as preached by them. For Lenin, trade unionism was a movement limited by the frame-work of today, a movement that does not step beyond the every day needs of the workers, a craft movement, a narrow sectional trade movement that does not pursue any general class political objectives. This determined opposition to pure and simple trade unionism, to the overestimation of spontaneity, to the underestimation of conscious revolutionary action, runs right through the entire pamphlet *What Is to Be Done?* which was written during the period of intense struggle between the economists and the revolutionary section of the social democracy of that time.

In order strongly to emphasize, as he always did, the necessity of creating a revolutionary party apparatus, of consolidating the organized Social Democratic groups, Lenin sharply raised at that time, when it was extremely difficult to create a mass organization, the question of training revolutionary trade unionists. Lenin had been accused of desir-

ing to train a set of trade unionists who would be out of touch with the working class; nevertheless, with characteristic determination, he continued at that time, when it was necessary to build up the basic ranks of the party, to follow his course and, thanks to the determination with which he raised the question, which was not so much a question of organization as a political issue, thanks to the persistent stress which he laid upon the creation of a basic nucleus of the party, we got those cells out of which the party ultimately developed.

III.

In this book, Lenin also emphasized the necessity of the trade unions taking a neutral attitude towards the party. Only later did he explain why he believed in the neutrality of the trade unions. At that period when the party had not yet assumed organized shape, when he had only spontaneous circles, disconnected groups, strike committees, etc., all such weakly organizations arising out of the economic struggle might have become in Lenin's opinion, a drawback on the party itself, might have influenced it too strongly, whereas it was the role of the party to direct this spontaneous movement. At that time the party was too small, its circles were still very

weak, and in order to safeguard it to a certain extent against spontaneous pressure on the part of the economic groups whose standard of organization and class conscious was still low, Lenin advocated for that period the idea of neutrality. You know, of course, that Lenin in later years was opposed to the neutrality of the trade unions. Yet at the dawn of the Russian labor movement, when he first took a stand on this question he assumed, as you see, different position. Later, as the labor movement grew, as the tremendous strike wave of 1904, coupled with the Russo-Japanese war as the mass movement of 1905, when all of Russia was in the throes of a revolutionary conflagration, which culminated in the first revolution, and when this rapid development of the revolutionary process brought its changes into the labor movement itself, brought a rapid intensification of revolutionary conflicts, the party was compelled to assume a new position on the trade union question.

It should be pointed out that in 1905 the attitude to be assumed by the party towards the various issues of the trade union movement was still unclear. I remember personally that in 1905, while participating in the Bolshevik conference of the Volga provinces at Samara, I advocated the affiliation of the unions to the party. At that time the very problem of the trade union movement was mere

theory to us, but as the labor movement grew, as the trade unions multiplied in number and the primary mutual aid funds and societies began to develop into all sorts of shapeless trade unions, with different constitutions, different forms of organization, etc., it became necessary to give a more concrete answer to the question: What must be the attitude of the Social Democratic Party (as our party was then called) towards the trade union movement. Here we see that in 1907, in his preface to the book *Twelve Years*, Lenin wrote that his opponents, including Plekhanov, had attempted for a long time to give a basis to their differences with him on the question of the spontaneous and the conscious, but "Plekhanov's criticism," Lenin says "was obviously mere cavilling, based on phrases torn out of context, on particular expressions which I had not quite adroitly or precisely formulated." Thus, while there was no precise formulation on the question of the relations between the spontaneous and the conscious, Lenin admitted that on the question of neutrality he had really held an erroneous opinion. In the same preface Lenin writes: "[When I wrote *What Is to Be Done?*,] I advocated *neutrality* of the trade unions, and have *not altered* that view in the pamphlets or newspaper articles written since then, despite the numerous assertions by my opponents. Only the London R.S.D.L.P. Congress and

the Stuttgart International Socialist Congress led me to conclude that trade-union neutrality is not defensible as a *principle*." We thus see that with the growth of the labor movement, with the formation and consolidation of the social democracy Lenin began to see the question of trade union neutrality with greater clarity, which he admitted himself.

IV.

For the evolution of the opinions of the R.S.D.L.P. in general, and of its Bolshevist section in particular, trade union questions, the resolutions of the Stockholm and London congresses are extremely characteristic and significant. At the Stockholm Party Congress the Mensheviks had a majority and consequently the formulation which the congress gave to the attitude of the party towards the trade unions bears the earmarks of Menshevist ideology. Point four of the resolution of the Stockholm congress states that "the economic struggle will bring about a permanent betterment of the condition of the working masses and a crystallization of a genuine class organization only if it is properly co-ordinated with the political struggle of the proletariat." Thus it is a question of merely co-ordinating the struggle. The congress also urged on the other hand,

that "the party should support the workers in their tendency to organize in trade unions and do everything possible towards the formation of neutral trade unions." The very formulation of this point forced us to think, for we Bolsheviki do not speak of neutral unions. We speak of unaffiliated unions, and between unaffiliated and neutral there is a difference.

In opposition to this resolution which was favored by a majority of the congress, that is, by the Mensheviks, the Bolshevik faction moved its own resolution on the trade union question which was drawn up, of course, with the active participation of Lenin. The resolution of the Bolshevik faction puts the question of partisanship on quite a different basis. "The congress believes," the resolution states, "that the party should make every effort to educate the union workers, in the spirit of a clear understanding of the class struggle and of the socialist tasks of the trade unions, in order by its activity to gain actual control over the unions, and that ultimately these unions might, under certain conditions, directly affiliate to the party, without, of course, expelling their non-party members." You see that this formulation contains a strong, clearly Bolshevik deflection though it does not yet exhibit the clear cut, firm Bolshevik line of the future which was evolved as a result of greater experience in the

revolutionary trade union movement.

How is the expression "the unions might affiliate to the party" to be understood? It means organizational connections between the unions and the party, which, however, will secure the labor movement against opportunism only if the party is sufficiently powerful to direct the unions. We have countries where the unions are not only affiliated to the party, but where they have themselves created the party. In Norway, as you know, the party committee and the Trade Union Council are elected at one and the same meeting. We thus see that the Bolshevist resolution at the Stockholm congress contains a definite, sharp revolutionary, obviously anti-Menshevist approach to the question; yet this formulation is not sufficiently clear cut for the Bolshevist outlook. It did not develop in a day. It was not created at once, but grew gradually and crystallized with the growth of the labor movement itself.

Between the Stockholm congress, which was held in 1900, and the London congress, a year of organization and practical activities transpired. In Russia the struggle between the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks was waged all along the front, including also the trade union front, so that the London congress, as expressed in the resolution on the trade union question, marked a further step forward in respect of making a clearer formulation of the rela-

tions between the party and the unions and of the crystallization of the attitude of the party towards the very intricate question of the place and role of the trade unions in the general class struggle of the proletariat. At the London congress the question of the relations between the party and the unions was treated in a very short resolution which ends as follows: "The congress reminds the party organizations and the Social Democrats working in the trade unions that one of the fundamental tasks of the social democratic activities within the union is: To promote trade union recognition of the spiritual leadership of the Social Democratic Party and the establishment of organizational connections with them, and where the local conditions make it possible, to put this decision into effect."

We thus have a formulation which recognizes the spiritual leadership of the party and calls for organizational connections between it and the unions, though not for organizational unity; these two terms are far from being identical in their meaning. Organizational connections at that period were understood to mean mutual representation. The party had its delegate in the Trade Union Council, or as it was then called in the Central Bureau of Trade Unions, but the question of whether this bureau as an organization ought to have a representative on the party committee was repeatedly discussed

but remained unsettled. The Bolshevik position on this question was quite clear: Representatives from the trade unions should be persuaded to engage in party work, the party itself should participate in the work of the Trade Union Bureau, but no representative of this Central Bureau should be invited to the party committee. You see how with the growth of the Russian labor movement the struggle within the Social Democratic Party was sharpening, and two tendencies were taking shape, developing two distinct lines on every question, including also the trade union question. The first line, calling for parallel action by the party and the trade unions, ultimately culminated in the ideology of the independence and neutrality of the trade unions; the second line, calling for close co-operation, a close line-up and the spiritual leadership of the party over the unions, culminated in that form of the trade union movement which we now have here in Soviet Russia.

Lenin again stated his views on the question of the trade unions in an article *Trade Union Neutrality*, published illegally in 1908 ("The Proletarian," [*Proletary*], February 19, 1908). Here the question of trade union neutrality is raised with particular acuteness and we find some of those formulates with which we meet in the post-revolutionary work of Lenin. In this article Lenin wrote: "The class

interests of the bourgeoisie inevitably give rise to a striving to confine the unions to petty and narrow activity within the framework of the existing social order, to keep them away from any contact with socialism; and the neutrality theory is the ideological cover for these strivings of the bourgeoisie... at the outset of the workers' political and trade-union movements in Europe it was possible to uphold trade-union neutrality as a means of widening the original field of proletarian struggle during the period when it was comparatively undeveloped and when the bourgeoisie exerted no systematic influence on the unions. At the present time it is quite indefensible, from the point of view of international Social-Democracy, to uphold trade-union neutrality."

This was written in 1908 after the Stuttgart Congress.

V.

Taking the Russian labor movement between 1908 and 1914 we find here first a period of reaction which lasted approximately up to the beginning of 1912 and then a brief period embracing the years 1912-13-14, which were years of an industrial expansion and of a revival of the labor movement. During this re-

vival of the Russian labor movement in 1912-13-14 the Bolshevik attitude towards the trade unions assumed perfectly definite and clear cut forms. The struggle against the Mensheviks was centered at that time on the question of the extent to which the legal conditions should be utilized, the strengthening of the illegal party and the supremacy or spiritual leadership over the legal trade unions by the illegal party. In every field of labor activity and particularly in the trade union field, Lenin strenuously fought for spiritual control by the illegal party organization. I shall not dwell at length upon that period, but shall pass over to the more recent period in the Russian labor movement and to the theoretical and practical questions which were connected with its development, and the role which Lenin played in the formulation of the Communist viewpoint on the trade union movement.

You know that beginning with February, 1917, Russia has experienced a stormy development of trade unionism. Russia, which entered the revolution with but a few unions had three and a half months later, by the time of the Third trade union conference one and one-half million organized workers. At this conference (June 20-28, 1917) there was a collision between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks. This time, in a new situation, under the conditions of the unfolding revolution, the old

conflict flared up again with renewed vigor. The conference was dominated by Mensheviks and Social Revolutionists. Consequently the trade union tasks as formulated by it bear a definite stamp of Menshevism.

During the period of revolution, the period of the rapid development of events, of the development of conflicts, at the time when the third trade union conference was in session, Lenin wrote two articles on the trade union question focussing his attention upon the organization of the agricultural workers. On the surface there appears to be no connection between the trade union conference and Lenin's articles on the creation of an Agricultural Workers' Union, but if we read this article carefully, if we view it from the angle of the unfolding struggle of that period and of the role which the peasant masses were to play in our revolution, it will become clear why, at the end of June, when events were following fast upon each other, Lenin raised the question of the organization of a Farm Workers' Union. Lenin wrote: "The basic role of the party, the first commandment of every trade union movement should be: 'Do not rely upon the state,' rely only upon the power of your class. The state is an organization of the class in power. Do not rely upon promises, rely upon the power of union and upon the consciousness of your class." And he

continues further on, "The Farm Workers' Union must therefore at once raise as its task not merely the improvement of the conditions of the workers, but particularly the protection of their interests as a class during the, coming great agrarian transformation."

We see that at the time the conference was in session hastily summing up the first results of the industrial organization among city workers Lenin pointed to the necessity of rallying the farm workers to the struggle, for he saw that they were to play a serious part in the approaching peasant revolution. Thus every time Lenin took up trade union questions he viewed the movement not as something separate and isolated from the general political situation; he approached the trade unions as an organized section of the working class movement and later, especially during the great discussion on the trade union movement and in a number of articles and speeches prior to this discussion, he clearly ascribed to the trade unions a role and position of a part of the complex mechanism of the social struggle. He never separated the trade union movement from the political movement but always selected in the trade union movement itself those factors, those aspects which were of outstanding importance in the general class struggle of the proletariat at the particular period.

VI.

The end of June, 1917, and particularly the period following after the failure of the July action, saw an overwhelming growth and revolutionization of the trade unions, which were rapidly captured by the Bolsheviks, though in the central trade union federation we were still in the minority. By October, we had a tremendous majority throughout the unions, though in some unions, chiefly of non-manual workers, the Mensheviks were still quite strong.

Here the central point of serious interest in the definition of Lenin's view of the role of the trade unions is the October revolution and the part played in it by the unions. In his articles and in his speeches Lenin always considered the trade unions as working class organizations destined to play an immense role in the overthrow of the old system and in the creation of a new one. At the forefront of Lenin's interest was the formation and consolidation of the party, and in approaching the unions he viewed them from the angle of party leadership and of the achievements of the tasks raised by the party. During the October revolution itself there was no break between the party and the trade unions, which took an active part in the direct struggle in conjunction

with the shop committees. The October revolution brought to the fore the question of the further destinies of the trade unions and here as in the pre-October period, the points of view formulated in our party on the trade union question are of exceptional interest. These views were completely linked up with the question of the rate at which our revolution and the revolutionary movement in western Europe were going to develop. Directly after the October revolution the party gave rise to a tendency which believed that the unions had outlived their time, since their existence due to the capitalist relations and, therefore, with organizational machinery of the socialized industry should be based primarily upon the trade unions. They should gradually rid themselves of the craft narrowness and be transformed into mighty industrial unions embracing the majority and gradually all the workers of the particular industry. Being already, by the laws of the Soviet Republic and by fixed tradition, participants in all the local and central industrial managing bodies, the trade unions should come to the actual concentration within their hands of the entire management of the entire public economy as a single economic whole.”

This formulation, drawn up by Lenin, represents theoretically a perfectly correct approach to the question of the role of the trade unions in the

proletarian revolution. It was subjected to a running fire of criticism, chiefly on the part of Comrade Riazanov, who contended that the statement "the unions should come to the concentration within their hands of the entire industry" was a clearly a reflection of Syndicalism. "This contains an inconsistent and non-Marxian thought" Comrade Riazanov protested. On the other hand this formula gave a definition of the trade union tasks which went contrary to the line of the party majority. This formula was made the foundation of the platform of the "labor opposition" who contended that the Russian trade unions were ready for the immediate operation of this particular part of the program. Comrade Riazanov's position on this question always appeared to me erroneous for his estimation of this part of our program represents a static rather than dynamic approach, whereas the program considers the concentration of the management of industry in the hands of the trade unions only as a result of an historical process which the trade unions will go through gradually.

If we ask ourselves which organizations will finally manage industry, how the relations between the various organizations will develop objectively with the development of the revolution, from which organizations the industrial managements will ultimately evolve, we must reply that the answers to

these questions depend upon a great number of factors: upon the relative strength of the proletariat in the country, upon the relationship between agriculture and the city industries, upon the rate of revolutionary development in Western Europe, upon the degree of the organization of the proletariat, etc. The trade unions will ultimately prove to be the basis of the organization which will concentrate in its hands production as a whole.

The mistake of the "labor opposition" consisted not in its general contention, but in its belief that right at that time, that is, in 1920, the trade unions were capable of assuming the responsibility for putting into effect that particular clause of the program. The labor opposition did not take into consideration the state of our industry, the overwhelming domination of agriculture and small industry, the slow development of the revolution, the, approaching NEP, which was already making itself felt, in the discussion on the trade unions in 1920.

VII.

The problem of the governmentalization of the trade unions was thus raised by the October revolution and we are the only country in the world where

this question has become a subject of discussion. To the extent that the workers of other countries have considered the theoretical questions of economic reconstruction on the morrow of the revolution answers to these questions can be found both in the syndicalist and in the reformist literature, but in the plane in which it has been considered here, the questions have never before been treated.

In order to get a clear idea of how Lenin and the party as a whole, view the questions of the trade union movement and structure, we must touch upon several events of the post October period of our revolution. I have already stated that the question of the governmentalization of the trade unions aroused a great controversy within the party itself. The sharpness of the discussion was due to an over-estimation of the rate of development both of our own and the West European revolution. Very characteristic in this connection was Comrade Lenin's speech at the second trade union congress in 1919: "especially after the political revolution," Lenin said, "which has transferred power to the proletariat (formulated briefly, Lenin does not waste words), the time has come for the trade unions, as the broadest organization of the proletariat on a class scale, to play a very great role, to take the centre of the political stage, to become, in a sense, the chief political organ. For all the old concepts and categories of

politics have been upset and reversed”

This was Lenin’s fundamental premise. Further, he said: “The trade unions have to be governmentalized; they have to be fused with state bodies. The work of building up large-scale industry has to be entrusted entirely to them.” “If we take into consideration the clause of the program which I have cited and the foregoing formulation, it will become clear that they co-incide in every detail.”

Lenin sharply and repeatedly stressed the inevitability of the governmentalization of the trade unions. But Lenin was primarily a political dialectician. He approached every question not from an abstract point of view, but from a concrete angle, and consequently in treating this question of governmentalization he approached it primarily from the point of view of the concrete practical struggle which the trade unions will have to carry out in the work of industrial reconstruction. He says in one of his speeches: “we shall have to take quite a number of steps more before we are in a position to say that the trade union organisations of the working people have definitely merged with the entire state apparatus. That will be so when the workers completely take over the organs of suppression of one class over the other.” You see that the question of the governmentalization of the trade unions is linked up with a number of other questions, with the question of the

rate of the revolution, the question of the creation of a genuine proletarian state machinery, etc.

For Lenin the governmentalization of the trade unions was a long process of practical activity, of direct work in the organization of the national economy. He thought of the transformation of the unions into organs of state power as of a process which begins by participation in the government of the country and ends in the building up of new organs exclusively under the control of the trade unions. But why must the trade unions, in Lenin's opinion, come to control the national economy? "Because," Lenin replies, "the trade unions are mass organizations and the revolution is primarily the creation of the masses itself." Lenin formulates this idea in the following words: "The trade unions are becoming the chief builders of the new society, for only the millions can build this society. In the era of serfdom these builders numbered hundreds; in the capitalist era the builders of the state numbered thousands and tens of thousands. The socialist revolution can be made only with the active and direct practical participation of tens of millions in state administration."

VIII.

Thus for Lenin the question of the governmentalization of the trade unions was a question of the activity of the masses themselves. As the tens of millions of people are drawn into the struggle the machinery of production will fall under the control of the trade unions. The sooner the masses are set into motion, the sooner the thousands and millions of workers are drawn into active political work, into active reconstruction, the sooner will we come to the materialization of this clause of our program on the governmentalization of the trade unions. That is how Lenin deciphered our attitude on this question. Lenin never forgot the fundamental rule of Hegel's dialectics. "Truth is concrete." He takes Russia of today, our peasant Russia and confronts the millions of laboring masses with the problem of capturing the entire machinery by which the industrial life of the country is run. In the same speech delivered at the second trade union congress he asks the fundamental question: What concrete practical problems stand before the trade unions and what course must they follow? And he replies: "their task [of the trade unions] is to advance these millions and tens of millions of working people from simple to higher forms of activity, untiringly drawing new

forces from the reserve of working people and advancing them to the most difficult tasks. In this way they will teach more and more people the art of state administration. It is their job to identify themselves with the struggle of the proletariat, which has established the dictatorship and is retaining it in the face of the whole world, every day winning over more industrial workers and socialists everywhere who only yesterday tolerated the orders of the social-traitors and social-defence advocates, but who are today coming more and more to accept the banner of communism and the Communist International.”

You see how Lenin approached the question of the trade unions. Here he addresses not the delegates of the congress, not the hundreds of Communists assembled there, he sees before him the tens of millions of people who are destined to accomplish a tremendous job and he lays down before the congress the following political line: “Get more and more toilers into this work.”

To Lenin the trade union question was not a separate distinct question. It could not be separated from the given political situation, and this idea was, as you remember, Lenin’s basic idea during the discussion. What was Trotsky’s basic idea on the trade union question? Trotsky said: “The unions are undergoing a grave crisis.” To this Lenin replied: “Insofar as we will and must speak of a crisis, the crisis is a

reflection of the painful process taking place among the working masses. Hence to concentrate one's attention on, as the question stood at that time, one's accusation upon the trade unions alone, upon a particular section, is a wrong treatment of the question, wrong in principles."

During the discussion of 1920 there were two central issues at stake. The first was the question of the trade unions with the organs of state power, and the second was the question of whether the trade unions should engage in the protection of the workers' interests. It was along these two lines that the division into platforms took place; the platform of "the ten," Trotsky's platform, the compromise platform, etc. In reading now what Lenin said and wrote during the discussion, one gets to see that Lenin was already aware of the approaching new turn implied in the discussion, that sharp turn in policy which the party was compelled to make at the beginning of 1921. For Lenin the discussion itself was a sign that some new elements had matured and began to make themselves felt in the economic and political fabric of the country, elements that were soon to take shape and come out into the open.

On the question of the unions with the state organs, Lenin said: "As regards this, it will be best to say nothing and see how it appears in practice." Why did Lenin approach so carefully, I would even say

suspiciously, the question in 1920? Why did Lenin who directly after the October revolution, during the first trade union congress, advocated the speedy governmentalization of the unions, approach the same question with such caution as at the beginning of 1920? Because he had already anticipated the approaching new turn which did not depend upon the good or bad will of the party, but upon the relationship of forces within our peasant country. For the rate of identification or integration of the welding together of the trade unions and the state, depended upon the building up of our national economy, upon the capture of agricultural industry by us, and, upon the development of the revolution in Western Europe Lenin saw that we were moving towards the new economic policy.

Then the second question: Can the trade unions, under the dictatorship of the proletariat, engage in the protection of the interests of the workers? The Mensheviks attempted during the early days of the revolution to build a special platform on this question. The "independent" Menshevik trade union movement was based upon the idea that after the October revolution the working class must be independent of the state, must put up demands to the proletarian state, organize strikes, etc. The trade unions should protect the interests of their membership, leaving the business of state to others, such

on the whole was, roughly speaking, the Menshevist point of view.

Thus the very formula of the protection by the unions of the interests of their members, under the dictatorship of the proletariat appeared to some comrades as a purely Menshevist formula. Many of them said: "To divide the unions and the state is to develop a force which may turn against the proletarian dictatorship, it means to warp in a sense the entire Communist line in the trade union field." To this Lenin replied: "it is not the working class but the peasant population that predominates in the country, and, secondly, that it is a workers' state with bureaucratic distortions. And the struggle against bureaucratic distortions can be conducted along two lines: Through the state apparatus and through direct pressure on the part of the workers themselves, whose trade unions protect the interests of their members and thereby combat bureaucracy."

Some time after the new economic policy was adopted the Central Committee of the party published a theses on the trade unions which provided for the possibility of strikes. How did this happen? If we approach the discussion on the trade unions in the same way as Lenin approached it, we will see that the new course in the trade union movement was a reflection of the general process and the general change. We will see that both the discussion

and the future changes of our tactics reflected the new relationship of forces, the slacking up of the development of the revolution in Western Europe, the growth of the petty bourgeois peasant sentiment and its pressure upon the city, and the number of economic and political phenomena which accompanied the introduction of the N.E.P.

If we turn to the decisions of our party and trade union congresses we will see how this necessity for retreating was reflected in their resolutions, and found its expression in the general policy of the trade unions. The question of the governmentization of the trade unions gradually receded to the background, being deferred to some future, the questions of direct protection of the workers' interests came to the fore (N.E.P. came), the trade unions became confronted with a new series of problems, problems that Lenin had clearly and vividly expounded in numerous speeches and articles.

X.

I shall now pass over to Lenin's role in the formation of a revolutionary trade union movement on a world scale. What was the most important issue in the trade union field after the war? You know that together with the revolution by the social democ-

racy, a tendency developed in the labor centers of many countries to do away with the trade unions altogether. Moreover, the German Communist Party at its Heidelberg congress took a stand in favor of the revolutionary workers, splitting the reformist unions and setting up new unions. We had quite a distinct current in our own Communist movement sharply hostile towards the old unions. "We cannot be in one organization with traitors, they will betray us, we must create new unions"—the representatives of this tendency insisted.

Comrades, it must be made clear that the question of the trade union movement in Western Europe is a central question, for there we have in many countries unions with enormous memberships, unions of long standing and with time honored traditions. We had to make clear what tactics to use in respect to the mass organizations, what to do with the reformist unions like those of Germany, having over 8,000,000 members. At this most crucial and decisive moment, Lenin came out with his pamphlet, *"Left-Wing" Communism: an Infantile Disorder* in which he offers a perfectly clear and definite solution of the Communist tactics in the trade union movement. There is a whole chapter in this book entitled "Should Revolutionaries Work in Reactionary Trade Unions?" Lenin analyzes all the left arguments for quitting the reformist unions

in this chapter. “We should have nothing to do with them because they do not defend the interests of the workers, we cannot support them because they are opportunists, no compromises,” the British lefts proclaimed. However, their leftism was in reverse proportion to their influence over the labor movement. And in the chapter dedicated to the British lefts, Lenin says: “On the contrary, the fact that most British workers still follow the lead of the British Kerenskys or Scheidemanns and have not yet had experience of a government composed of these people—an experience which was necessary in Russia and Germany so as to secure the mass transition of the workers to communism—undoubtedly indicates that the British Communists should participate in parliamentary action, that they should, from within parliament, help the masses of the workers see the results of a Henderson and Snowden government in practice, and that they should help the Hendersons and Snowdens defeat the united forces of Lloyd George and Churchill. To act otherwise would mean hampering the cause of the revolution, since revolution is impossible without a change in the views of the majority of the working class, a change brought about by the political experience of the masses, never by propaganda alone.”

But Lenin does not stop here. He says: “To lead the way without compromises, without

turning'—this slogan is obviously wrong if it comes from a patently impotent minority of the workers who know (or at all events should know) that given a Henderson and Snowden victory over Lloyd George and Churchill, the majority will soon become disappointed in their leaders and will begin to support communism (or at all events will adopt an attitude of neutrality, and, in the main, of sympathetic neutrality, towards the Communists). It is as though 10,000 soldiers were to hurl themselves into battle against an enemy force of 50,000, when it would be proper to 'halt,' 'take evasive action,' or even effect a 'compromise' so as to gain time until the arrival of the 100,000 reinforcements that are on their way but cannot go into action immediately. That is intellectualist childishness, not the serious tactics of a revolutionary class."

Lenin devotes several pages of his pamphlet to the German lefts as well. "The Mensheviks of the West have acquired a much firmer footing in the trade unions; there the *craft-union, narrow-minded, selfish, case-hardened, covetous, and petty-bourgeois 'labor aristocracy,' imperialist-minded, and imperialist-corrupted*, has developed into a much stronger section than in our country. That is incontestable. The struggle against the Gomperses, and against the Jouhaux, Hendersons, Merrheims, Legiens and Co. in Western Europe is much more

difficult than the struggle against our Mensheviks, who are an absolutely homogeneous social and political type.” This leads Lenin to the conclusion that there is no cause for nervousness but that it is necessary to work in the trade unions, to be where the workers are. This was the slogan raised by Lenin on the trade union question.

Here I feel compelled to cite another most characteristic passage: “Millions of workers in Great Britain, France and Germany are *for the first time* passing from a complete lack of organisation to the elementary, lowest, simplest, and (to those still thoroughly imbued with bourgeois-democratic prejudices) most easily comprehensible form of organisation, namely, the trade unions; yet the revolutionary but imprudent Left Communists stand by, crying out ‘the masses,’ ‘the masses!’ but *refusing to work within the trade unions*, on the pretext that they are ‘reactionary,’ and invent a brand-new, immaculate little ‘Workers’ Union,’ which is guiltless of bourgeois-democratic prejudices and innocent of craft or narrow-minded craft-union sins, a union which, they claim, will be (!) a broad organisation. ‘Recognition of the Soviet system and the dictatorship’ will be the *only* (!) condition of membership.” Lenin says plainly: “The task devolving on Communists is to *convince* the backward elements, to work *among* them, and not to *fence themselves off* from

them with artificial and childishly 'Left' slogans."

These few quotations will suffice to show how Lenin solved that most difficult question, the question of our tactics in the trade union movement. He advised: "Do not be nervous, a Communist must have strong wires in the place of nerves. Of course, the entire reformist officialdom must be driven out of the trade unions, but they should not be given the pleasure of our voluntary withdrawal. We must remain in the reactionary unions, work there, conquer the masses, drive out the leaders and turn the unions into organs of the revolution." This little book of Lenin's has played a tremendous part in the struggle against the left phraseology, which, as you know, Lenin hated.

It is also necessary to touch upon Lenin's estimation of the establishment of the Red International of Labor Unions. I remember that when in 1920 it fell to me, together with the representative from Italy, France, and other countries, to begin laying the foundation of the R.I.L.U. here in Moscow. I had some serious differences with D'Arragona who considered himself a left. We debated with him for several days. I proposed one basis for the creation of an international trade union center, while he proposed another.

Then Serratti suggested a compromise which was not, however, sufficiently clear. With this for-

mula of Serratti I went to Lenin. Lenin read it and said: "Yes, indeed, there is something unclear here, but that is not important. You create the center, and clarity will come of itself." Lenin attached particular importance to clarity of thought, of course, but when he saw that even a little step forward could be made by making some concession on the question of a formula, he always agreed and always proved to be right.

When the first trade union congress was called, Lenin addressed a letter to it in which he wrote: "It is difficult to find words in which to express the entire significance of the international congress of trade unions. The conversion of the trade union members to the ideas of Communism is moving irresistably onward everywhere in every country, throughout the world. It is moving irregularly, incorrectly, unsteadily, overcoming thousands of obstacles, but it is still moving irresistably onward. The International Congress of Trade Unions will accelerate this motion, Communism will win in the trade unions." Such were Lenin's greetings to the first constituent congress of the Red International of labor unions.

In conclusion, I shall touch upon the prospects of the trade union movement as they were understood by Lenin. If we follow up, step by step, all the resolutions on trade union questions adopted by our party congresses, all of Lenin's articles and

speeches on the trade union question, we shall get quite a definite line. It would not be true to say that Lenin and the party had the same opinion on trade union questions twenty-five years ago as today. In this respect, Comrade Gierinis was wrong when he wrote in the preface to his book, *Lenin and the Trade Union Movement* that Lenin's point of view expressed in *What is to be Done?* remained the same to the very end. This is untrue. The mind of the party has done some tremendous thinking during this stormy period. This path can be traced back also on the question of the role of the party. Take up *What Is to be Done?* and compare Lenin's formulation of that role of the Communist Party in the proletarian revolution given in that book with the formulation of the same question made, with his participation, by the Second Congress of the Communist International and you will then become aware of the path traversed by the party. What is the party? "The Communist Party is a part of the working class, and moreover its most advanced, most class-conscious and therefore its most revolutionary part. The Communist Party is created by the method of the natural selection of the best, the most class-conscious, the most self-sacrificing, and the most far-sighted workers. The Communist Party has no interests that differ from the interests of the whole working class. The Communist Party

differs from the whole working class because it has an overall view of the whole historical road of the working class in its totality and because at every turn in this road it strives to defend not just the interests of a single group or a single trade, but the interests of the working class in its totality. The Communist Party is the organizational and political lever with whose help the advanced part of the working class can steer the whole mass of the proletariat and the semi-proletariat on to the correct road.”

Thus was the role of the Communist Party clearly defined twenty years after *What Is to be Done?* on the basis of an infinitely rich historical experience.

XII.

What then are the prospects of the development of the party and the trade unions? Insofar as we are entering an epoch when the classes will disappear, we are moving towards a time when the state organs in all of their variations, and the party as the organ of the class struggle, will disappear. Will the party exist after Communism has been fully developed? No, in the future the party will disappear. Of course, it is still a long way off, and our Russian Communist Party will still exist a number of years in its present

form, but with the ultimate consolidation of Communism, it will disappear as a party.

What will happen with the other forms of working class organization? We have unions, co-operatives, Soviets, etc. The Soviets are organs of the state, organs of the proletarian dictatorship. They too, will disappear with the disappearance of the classes, which are the foundation of state power. What will happen to the trade unions? The trade unions will develop along the lines mapped out in our program. They will come to a point when the entire industries will be concentrated in their hands and when the organs of state, the party, etc., disappear, the trade unions will be transformed into new organizations, the names of which we do not know, but which will direct and manage industry, etc. Thus we have the following situation: At a certain historical moment the party will disappear; the separate sections of the party machinery will merge with the organs of state power and with the organs of industrial management which will gradually merge with the trade unions. All this will bring about at a certain historical moment a new formation, a new organ of industrial management that will be unlike the party, the Soviets, or the trade unions taken separately. Lenin said in one of his speeches: "That time is far off, most probably only our grandchildren will live to see it; today we are confronted with concrete

problems of tremendous importance and we must solve them.”

My conclusions will be extremely brief. Lenin ushered in something new not only into the Russian, but into the international labor movement as well. For Lenin the trade unions were a part of a mechanism. In one of his speeches he set forth in the following vivid manner: “The engine is the party, its cogs grip the cogs of the trade union wheel and bring them into motion, the trade unions in turn set into motion the greater masses.” Lenin viewed and valued the trade unions as a school for the education of the masses, for throwing the masses into action. For him the trade unions were of value only if they were imbued with the Communist spirit. He wrote in one of his articles: “That the unions are made up of workers is not enough. They represent an organization of their class only if they pursue a class line, a class policy.” To saturate the unions with a Communist ideology, to make them into a machine for the prosecution of the Communist line, to subordinate them to the influence of the Communist Party, to control them, to draw into the revolutionary movement, thru them, tens of millions of toilers, to educate the masses—this was Lenin’s aim thruout his policy. Lenin was an outstanding political thinker. He knew how to maneuver with millions, how to direct millions into the struggle, he correctly esti-

mated the role and the tasks of the trade unions and was instrumental in making the Russian trade union movement play an exceptional role in the shaping of the trade union movement of all countries, a role similar to that played by the Russian Communist Party in the Communist International, the role of a leading, inspiring, driving force. In this field as in every other field Lenin's influence was quite exceptional, demanding a thorn and long study for many years.