

Lenin's What is to be Done?



What is the role of theory in the communist movement? How should it affect the work we do?

*This important pamphlet of Lenin's is essential to study if we are to build a party capable of leading the masses to proletarian revolution, the dictatorship of the proletariat and the building of socialism. Consequently it was the first subject of discussion at our party's very first Marxist-Leninist study school held in Southall on 20-21 November 2004. [Note: When Lenin wrote *What is to be Done?* in 1902, 'social-democratic' meant 'communist'. A few years later, however, the term 'social-democratic' became synonymous with class collaborationism, as a result of which all parties that followed Lenin's line changed their names to 'communist'.]*

The importance of theory

In [What is to be Done?](#), Lenin stresses the importance of [revolutionary theory](#). Without it, no revolutionary movement can succeed in achieving its purposes. A comrade well versed in physics once remarked that he was always amazed that aeroplanes could stay up in the air. Essentially, he was remarking on the conflict between on the one hand the spontaneous understanding we all have of the law of gravity (as a result of our experience of living in a world where the sway of the law of gravity is ubiquitous), and on the other hand scientific truth, which has been established as truth by experiment. By grasping scientific truth we are able to do things that are impossible with only a spontaneous understanding. In politics too, revolutionaries must constantly challenge spontaneous understanding because it has been proved in practice that it is simply inadequate for the purpose of overthrowing capitalism and establishing socialism – undertakings which in their own way are far more difficult than getting heavy objects to fly. Opportunists, however, idolise spontaneous understanding, despite the fact that it arises in conditions of class society where bourgeois rule makes bourgeois ideology as ubiquitous as the law of gravity, and is therefore shot through and through with bourgeois prejudice. Lenin points out that the working class can spontaneously understand the need to resist the encroachments of capital, by strikes and other means, but cannot spontaneously mobilise to overthrow capitalism and replace it by a different economic

system of which they have no living experience – namely, socialism. They cannot spontaneously understand that capitalism is not capable of being adjusted so as to provide a decent life for all. They cannot spontaneously understand the nature of the social system that has to replace it. All this requires *class consciousness* – ie, scientific knowledge and understanding – which it is the duty of the revolutionary party to disseminate across the broadest masses of the proletariat – firstly among workers who are more advanced and positively seeking for understanding, and then from them out to broader sections of the working class. This is why Lenin said: "All worship of the spontaneity of the working-class movement, all belittling of the role of the 'conscious element', of the role of social democracy [communism], means, quite independently of whether he who belittles that role desires it or not, a strengthening of the influence of bourgeois ideology upon the workers."

What is the source of revolutionary theory?

Opportunists will often tell you that the source of political consciousness is not science, but 'the masses'. The view was popular in certain quarters in the SLP that there is no need to propagate revolutionary theory because the working class knows it all already. "I am a miner's daughter," said one member, "you can't teach me anything about politics." She meant that workers know everything there is to know by virtue of being working class. Actually, it was this comrade's training in the social-democratic politics of the Labour party that made it impossible to teach her anything: It is not easy to recover politically from such an experience. According to Lenin: "The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness ... The theory of socialism, however, grew out of the philosophic, historical and economic theories elaborated by the educated representatives of the propertied classes ..." Since the days of Marx and Engels, socialist theory is of course no longer confined to educated representatives of the propertied classes but has spread among the proletarian intelligentsia – workers who have taken up its ideas and made them their

own. The proletariat today by and large embrace socialist theory more gladly than 'educated representatives of the propertied classes', for the scientific knowledge uncovered by the great scientific socialists only benefits the proletariat, not the bourgeoisie, since it lays bare the fact that the capitalist system has outlived its usefulness and has urgently to be replaced by a socialist system – a system that only the proletariat is materially interested in bringing about. The life experience of working-class people predisposes them to be able to understand revolutionary theory (when they put their mind to it) far more readily than the privileged petty bourgeoisie and labour aristocracy. It remains the case, however, that the working class does not *spontaneously* generate revolutionary theory. Spontaneously it can go no further than trade union politics. As is well known, opportunists are past masters at using Marx to defeat Marx, and a typical ploy is the distortion of Marx's statement that "Every step of real movement is more important than a dozen programmes". This is a statement that is often used by opportunists to justify activity that lacks any kind of revolutionary orientation, and to attack all theoretical work: that is to say, all work aimed at making a conscious analysis of the world situation and of what is needed to bring about proletarian revolution, and at spreading that knowledge and class consciousness among the broadest possible layers of the proletariat. This is why Lenin wrote: "To repeat these words [of Marx] in a period of theoretical disorder is like wishing mourners at a funeral 'Many happy returns of the day'."

Theory vs practice?

The opportunists condemn those people who stress the importance of theory as armchair professors who are averse to doing any practical work. The point, however, is not that one should do no practical work; it is that one should do plenty of practical work but that this work should advance the cause of proletarian revolution, not the cause of preservation of capital. It is precisely as a *guide to practical work* that theory is important – it has no other value. As one philosopher put it, there is nothing as practical as a good theory. *To belittle theory is to undermine practical work.* Engels pointed out in the 1874 [Preface](#) to *The Peasant War in Germany* (quoted by Lenin in [chapter 1](#)) that the revolutionary movement has three aspects: the theoretical, the political and the practical-economic, and that none of these can be neglected. There can be division of labour within the movement, with certain individuals contributing more in one sphere than in others, according to their

talents, but no aspect can be neglected. Above all, theory cannot be neglected, because correct theory is the only guide to correct practice. Some opportunists occasionally pay lip service to the importance of theory, but apparently consider that it has no relevance to their everyday political work (clearly making *them* the 'dogmatists' – a label that they like to apply to those who do actually believe that theory is precisely a guide to action).

Reforms and revolution

Lenin went on to make it clear that even trade union struggles are far from being the be-all and end-all that they tend to be regarded as in the left-wing movement: "Social democracy [communism] leads the struggle of the working class, not only for better terms for the sale of labour-power, but for the abolition of the social system that compels the propertyless to sell themselves to the rich ... "Hence, it follows that not only must social democrats not confine themselves exclusively to the economic struggle, but that they must not allow the organisation of economic exposures to become the predominant part of their activities. We must take up actively the political education of the working class and the development of its political consciousness." There are a number of reasons why one should not worship trade union struggles at the expense of genuinely revolutionary work: (1) Trade union struggles can easily lead to reformism: "'Economic' concessions (or pseudo-concessions)," said Lenin, "are, of course, the cheapest and most advantageous from the government's point of view, because by these means it hopes to win the confidence of the working masses. For this very reason, we social democrats *must not* under any circumstances or in any way whatever create grounds for the belief (or the misunderstanding) that we attach greater value to economic reforms, or that we regard them as being particularly important, etc." (2) Workers are capable of spontaneously generating trade union activity for themselves; they do not need revolutionaries to lead these struggles. Taking on the voice of an advanced worker in Russia, Lenin wrote: "The 'activity' you want to stimulate among us workers, by advancing concrete demands that promise palpable results, we are already displaying and in our everyday, limited trade union work we put forward these concrete demands, very often without any assistance whatever from the intellectuals. But *such* activity is not enough for us. We are not children to be fed on the thin gruel of 'economic' politics alone; we want to know everything that others know; we want to learn the details of *all* aspects of political life and to take part *actively* in every

single political event. "In order that we may do this, the intellectuals must talk to us less of what we already know and tell us more about what we do not yet know and what we can never learn from our factory and 'economic' experience, namely, political knowledge." (3) Even the very best type of trade union activity cannot bring about revolution: "The secretary of any ... trade union," said Lenin, "always helps the workers to carry on the economic struggle, he helps them to expose factory abuses, explains the injustice of the laws and of measures that hamper the freedom to strike and to picket ... explains the partiality of arbitration court judges who belong to the bourgeois classes, etc ... "It cannot be too strongly maintained that *this is still not* social democracy, that the social democrat's ideal should not be the trade union secretary, but *the tribune of the people*, who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects ... who is able to take advantage of every event, however small, in order to set forth *before all* his socialist convictions and his democratic demands, in order to clarify *for all* and everyone the world-historic significance of the struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat." Despite reading Lenin many times, it is difficult, given the prejudices of the left-wing movement in Britain today, saturated as it is with petty-bourgeois and labour-aristocratic thinking, to accept that it is not enough to emulate a good trade union secretary. Arthur Scargill, for instance, was always a very good trade union secretary, but has proved himself quite incapable of playing a revolutionary role. Moreover it will be noted that the tribune of the people needs to be able to react to every manifestation of tyranny. Nowadays, with our British imperialist class enemy engaged in wars of oppression in [Iraq](#) and [Afghanistan](#), we must be exposing to workers what is going on, refusing to allow them to be taken in by bourgeois fairy tales about defending human rights. On the contrary, workers must understand that war in pursuit of loot *is an inevitable part of the capitalist system*, and one of the major reasons why it must be overthrown. Too many people in the SLP thought that talking about imperialism put people off and lost us votes, and that therefore such talk should be banned. People enmeshed by reformism come to believe that the reforms are everything. What is the point of struggling if it is not to win? A similar 'logic' applies to participation in bourgeois elections. Communists do so to propagate the proletarian point of view. Once entangled in the election ethos, however, we find ourselves, like the bourgeois parties, giving overwhelming importance to how

many votes we receive. Unless we are careful, we start toning down our political message to be more acceptable to a prejudiced electorate. The same is true of struggles for reforms and economic struggles. Yes, we must participate, but we do so in order to help create a revolutionary understanding that makes sense of the struggle and looks forward to the time when it will be possible to remove the cause of misfortunes – capitalism – rather than constantly having to fight for what should be ours by right. The 'logic' of reformism, however, urges us to forget the revolutionary politics – they are 'divisive', we are told, and threaten the unity that is so necessary to win the fight for reforms. We give up working for revolution in the name of unity with opportunists! No, we must fight this opportunism tooth and nail, just as Lenin did. It is not possible in a brief article to mention all the important points and examples given by Lenin in his pamphlet. It needs to be read over and over again to help us resist the desire to make concessions to spontaneity that cannot but undermine the party's role, which is not primarily to improve the conditions of workers under capitalism, but to lead the working class to proletarian revolution, to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat and to build socialism.

1 February 2005