

The Role of the Revolutionary Newspaper in the Struggle Today.

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

THE CONTRIBUTION OF LENIN.

MODERN OPPONENTS OF LENIN'S VIEWS

MODERN SUPPORTERS OF LENIN'S VIEWS.

THE ROLE OF THE PAPER TODAY - CONCLUSION.

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INTRODUCTION

In discussing the question of the role of the newspaper in the contemporary revolutionary struggle, I will refer to Lenin's historic contribution on this question and to more recent attempts to deal with the question of the revolutionary newspaper. Such attempts have been made by two groups which have now passed out of existence, and whilst these are no doubt not the only groupings which have consciously considered this question in recent times, they do illustrate the two poles of views, and illustrate perspectives on the working class readership today which differ fundamentally. These groups were Proletarian in the early '80s and The Communist Workers Movement in '79. It is well known that Lenin's paper, Iskra, played an important part in the building of the Bolshevik party. In examining the question of the revolutionary newspaper today, both these groups explore the role of Iskra.

There are a great many newspapers published regularly in this country by groups and "parties" which are intended for workers and for the supporters of those organisations. The Morning Star, the successor to The Daily Worker, which was for a time a fighting paper, does no more than give support to the Labour Party, whilst The Worker, which opposes the Labour Party, devotes its pages mostly to the trade union struggles.

And as the journal 'Proletarian No. 1' demonstrated, The New Worker has, to use the term used by Lenin, a thoroughly 'economist' perspective, which often amounts to an appeal to

the spontaneous action of workers. Such papers show a tendency to "talk down" to the workers. Their approach, like the "economists" of old, is to "trail behind" the spontaneous movement and issue calls to action to the workers.

There are papers which publish monthly or bimonthly which do not appeal quite so openly to spontaneity. But these do not do so because of a conscious understanding of the Leninist role of the paper in the contemporary struggle. Some of the papers which provide a deeper analysis, such as the often highly readable Fight Racism! Fight Imperialism! [RCG] do little more than offer an interesting left slant to stories in the capitalist press and media.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF LENIN.

Lenin saw the newspaper as an educator and an organiser. Iskra promoted working class consciousness and provided a revolutionary education. It was a tribune which engaged in political exposures and gave voice to the proletariat and other oppressed classes.

"The role of a newspaper, however, is not limited solely to the dissemination of ideas, to political education, and to the enlistment of political allies. A newspaper is not only a collective propagandist and a collective agitator, it is also a collective organiser". [CW 5 p.22]

Lenin likened the newspaper to scaffolding that helps erect the building of a proletarian party. Iskra prepared the ground for the creation of the Bolshevik Party, both ideologically and organisationally, and it educated a whole generation of professional revolutionaries. Iskra combined propaganda with the development of theory.

"Iskra's three years of activity (1901 - 3) saw the elaboration of the social-democratic party's programme, its main tactics, and

the forms in which the workers' economic and political struggle could be combined on the basis of consistent Marxism." [CW 20 p.250]

The ideas outlined above are generally agreeable to most people on the left. However, controversy arises over Lenin's theory of levels of political consciousness, expounded in *What Is To Be Done?*, in which he argued that there were different levels of consciousness in the working class (or in any class for that matter, including the intelligentsia), and that the newspaper should be aimed at the level of the advanced worker, and should aim to raise the level of the average worker.

He also argued (a matter raised in *The Communist Manifesto*) that consciousness arises from outside the class. Lenin's views on the party paper were closely connected to his view that Communism represents "the combination of socialism and the working-class movement". The task of Communists 'is to bring definite socialist ideals to the spontaneous working class movement, to connect this movement with socialist convictions that should attain the level of contemporary science, to connect it with the regular political struggle for democracy as a means of achieving socialism - in a word, to fuse this spontaneous movement into one indestructible whole with the activity of the revolutionary party'[CW 4 p.217)

These concepts have a profound significance on the role of the newspaper in the struggle today. They mean that some people, the advanced workers, will be more ready to answer the call of revolutionary science and revolutionary practice, and that consequently the paper should be aimed at the level of the advanced workers. These ideas were taken up by the Proletarian group in their polemical journal, *Economism, Tailism and the New Communist Party*.

J.V. STALIN

The ideas Lenin argued for in *What Is To Be Done?* were supported and developed by Comrade Stalin. His pamphlet *Briefly About the Disagreements in the Party*, written in the spring of 1905, is closely connected with *What Is To Be Done?* [J.V. Stalin, *Collected Works*, Russian edition, Vol.1, pp.89-130).]

Comrade Stalin also defended Lenin's views in 'A Reply To *Sotsial-Demokrat*' [J.V. Stalin, *Collected Works*, Russian edition, Vol.1, pp.160-72] Lenin stated that this article contained "a splendid presentation of the question of the celebrated 'introduction of consciousness from without' "

MODERN OPPONENTS TO LENIN'S VIEWS

The Communist Workers Movement (CWM) held the position that the conditions we are in today require a different sort of paper from that described by Lenin.

The CWM argued that Communists could not mechanically apply (or, in fact at all apply) Lenin's plan to our own tasks. They were resolute in their stand against the Labour party and they opposed Soviet revisionism, yet opposed Lenin in arguing against a revolutionary newspaper at the level of the advanced workers. They did this first by highlighting the differences between the organisational tasks in despotic Russia and in Britain today (and indeed with the Britain of the 1890s).[see *The Revolutionary Press in Britain and What Is To Be Done To Rebuild It*, New Era Books, 1979]

In *Our Immediate Tasks* [CW vol 4 pp. 219-220) Lenin had argued the extraordinary necessity to concentrate *all* Party forces -- all literary forces, all organisational abilities, all material resources etc. on the newspaper.

He explained that "The necessity to concentrate *all* forces on establishing a regularly appearing and regularly delivered organ arises out of the peculiar situation of Russian Social-Democracy as compared with that of Social-Democracy in other European countries and with that of the old Russian revolutionary parties. Apart from newspapers, the workers of Germany, France etc. have numerous other means for the public manifestation of their activity, for organising the movement -- parliamentary activity, election agitation, public meetings, participation in local public bodies (rural and urban), the open conduct of trade unions (professional, guild), etc., etc. *In place of all that*, yes, *all* of that, we must be served -- until we have won political liberty -- by a revolutionary newspaper, without which no broad organisation of the working-class movement is possible." (Lenin's emphasis).

The CWM argued that Lenin had only put forward his views on the role of the newspaper because of the lack of possibilities for other means. However, the point he actually makes is that it is for this reason that *all* forces must be concentrated on it.

They also believed that the Russian Marxists had a firm base in the working class which Communists did not now have. This is not surprising, since they had to sell their paper outside factory gates rather than as workers inside the factory, and from door to door on estates in working class areas where they did not live.

They believed that to build proletarian solidarity with other oppressed sections, to direct propaganda and agitation among all social classes as Lenin argued for in *What Is To Be Done?*, would serve to dissipate their meagre forces at the present stage. At the time Lenin was writing (1905), the Russian movement had begun to attract the best representatives of the younger generation of the educated classes, attracting gigantic forces (whereas three years earlier, "one could count the social

Democrats on the fingers of one's hand"[CW 5 p.429] and "the entire task then was to consolidate our position in the working class"[CW 5 p.429]

They were writing in 1979. But in the world of 1995, there are huge resources of advanced workers with no party or in small groupings, there are ever more working class people who are disillusioned with the way things are. There is popular access to computer technology, with easy methods of publishing and even the interNet, one of the ways in which a newspaper might be distributed. The working class has never been better placed to organise, and the advanced workers are easier to reach than ever before.

The CWM wished to restrict the content of its paper mainly to agitational material. They believed questions of theory are best taken up by a separate journal. In our opinion, this attitude would keep education outside the workers revolutionary newspaper. It is insulting to the working class. What circulation would this journal, which was not the revolutionary newspaper, have? Clearly they did not have much faith in the ability of the working class to bring forth its own leaders.

Yet in a footnote, the CWM quoted Lenin writing of Iskra:

"all aspects of the movement should be reflected in . . . the newspaper, and we wish particularly to emphasise our opposition to the view that a workers' newspaper should devote its pages exclusively to matters that immediately and directly concern the spontaneous working-class-movement, and leave everything pertaining to the theory of socialism, science, politics, questions of party organisation, etc., to a periodical for the intelligentsia."

The CWM believed that their paper should aim 'at a broader range of readership than Iskra aimed to reach'. This showed a

grave misunderstanding of Lenin, since Iskra was aimed at the level of the advanced worker, with the intention of raising the level of the average worker. They stated that:

'In the political atmosphere prevailing in Britain today, we are going to have to settle for a readership with, politically speaking, a "lower common denominator", at any rate for some time to come.' Compared to Iskra, the paper should be 'easier on the eye (as well as on the Brain.)' However, it would have a 'propaganda core', i.e. a small section of political analysis, for the few who did not skip over it. They considered that the readership of this would be politically advanced workers (not in Lenin's sense, but workers with a measure of class consciousness).

In spite of the Leninist appearances, the position of the CWM on the paper is similar to that of the groups (like the leftist SWP or revisionist papers) which they criticise. (Incidentally, this group was made famous by its booklet, 'Why Paul Foot should be A Socialist'.) Their views on not aiming the paper at the level of the advanced worker mirror the New Worker's comment that '*the issue was to advance Britain's lamentably backward working class*', not to create a paper at the level of the advanced workers which raised the level of the average workers.

Lenin wrote 'What Is To Be Done?' not simply in response to Russian conditions, but also British conditions. Lenin first translated and studied the book 'Industrial Democracy', which eulogises the spontaneous development of the British working class and trade union movement. Lenin's work repudiates not only the organisational theories of Russian opportunists, but also the Fabian concepts of Sidney and Beatrice Webb.

MODERN SUPPORTERS OF LENIN'S VIEWS

In the early '80s Proletarian published a polemical journal in which they argued for Lenin's views concerning the revolutionary newspaper and the view that it should be aimed at the level of the advanced worker. The argument for this has never been expressed better than by Lenin himself.

'The history of the working class movements in all countries shows that the better situated strata of the working class respond to the ideas of socialism more rapidly and more easily. From among these come, in the main, the advanced workers that every working class movement brings to the fore, those who can win the confidence of the labour masses, who devote themselves entirely to the education and organisation of the proletariat, who accept socialism consciously, and who even elaborate independent socialist theories. Every viable working class movement has brought to the fore such working class leaders, its own Proudhons, Vaillants, Weitlings, and Bebels . . . who despite their wretched living conditions, despite the stultifying penal servitude of factory labour possess so much character and will power that they study, study, study, and turn themselves into conscious Social Democrats -- 'The working class intelligentsia'. . . We must make every effort to ensure that its ranks are regularly reinforced, that its lofty requirements are met . . . The newspaper that wants to become the organ of all Russian Social Democrats must, therefore, be at the level of the advanced workers; not only must it not lower its level artificially, but, on the contrary it must raise it constantly, it must follow up all the tactical political and theoretical problems of world Social Democracy.

After the numerically small stratum of advanced workers comes the broad stratum of average workers. These workers too, strive ardently for socialism, participate in study circles and agitation, and differ from the preceding stratum only in that they cannot become fully independent leaders of the Social Democratic working class movement. The average worker will

not understand some of the articles in a newspaper that aims to be the organ of the party, he will not be able to get a full grasp of an intricate theoretical or practical problem. *This does not at all mean that the newspaper must lower itself to the level of the mass of its readers.* The newspaper, on the contrary, must raise their level and help promote advanced workers from the middle stratum of workers. Such workers, absorbed by local, practical work and interested mainly in the events of the working class movement and the immediate problems of agitation, should connect their every act with thoughts of the entire Russian working class movement, its historical task, and the ultimate goal of socialism, so that the newspaper, *the mass of whose readers are average workers,* must connect socialism and the political struggle with every local and narrow question.

Lastly, behind the stratum of average workers comes the mass that constitutes the lower strata of the proletariat. It is quite possible that a socialist newspaper will be completely or well-nigh incomprehensible to them . . . but it would be absurd to conclude from this that the newspaper of the social democrats should adapt itself to the lowest possible level of the workers. The only thing that follows from this is that different forms of agitation must be brought to bear on these strata -- pamphlets written in more popular language, oral agitation, and chiefly -- leaflets on local events . . . arousing the consciousness of the lower strata of the workers may have to take a form of legal educational activities'.² [*Proletarian's emphasis*]

The relevant section of the journal Proletarian No. 1 has recently been re-issued by the Communist Workers Group.

THE ROLE OF THE REVOLUTIONARY PAPER TODAY.

The views expressed by Lenin on the role of the revolutionary newspaper are relevant today. His views relate to the fusion of the advanced workers with the revolutionary marxist movement, and how this is to be achieved. The concept of the role of the paper is closely connected to the concept of the vanguard proletarian party.

As Proletarian No. 1 argues, the central role of the revolutionary newspaper is to raise the level of the advanced workers, those who turn themselves into conscious communists able to understand all the intricate theoretical problems of the movement. To do so, the paper must address all the tactical, political and theoretical problems of the movement and must always connect local questions with the ultimate aims of socialism.

In the preparatory period attention must be devoted *principally* to training worker revolutionaries. Lenin saw the paper as a means of creating a scaffolding around which the proletarian party could be formed. Its business was to deepen and intensify political exposures.

But in the revolutionary period the emphasis of the party's propaganda and agitation is shifted towards the lower strata masses of the working class. At this time, the spontaneity of the masses is turning from inactivity or merely trade union activity to potentially revolutionary activity.

We have decided to reissue the first part of Proletarian No. 1, because we believe and know that if the the concept of levels of political consciousness is not assimilated, the goal of founding a revolutionary paper aimed at the level of the advanced workers will not be achieved. Without practice basing itself on this theory, there will be no party of the class and there can be no talk of a successful workers' revolution, which leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat.

