

What is to be done? Burning questions of our movement

V.I. Lenin

Lenin wrote *What Is To Be Done?* in late 1901 and early 1902 as part of the struggle to build a revolutionary party on sound theoretical principles. Lenin's masterpiece is a development of the basic ideas found in *Where to Begin*, and the two should be read in conjunction.

Early on in the history of Russian Marxism, there was a dividing line, albeit unclear at first, between two separate trends. The first, the revolutionary trend, based itself upon the working class and linked the perspective of a revolutionary overthrow of tsarism to the struggle for workers' power. The second, a reformist current which, while paying lip service to Marxism, effectively preached the policy of class collaboration and subservience to the liberals.

This, in essence, was the basis of the disagreement between Marxists and Economists. In different guises, the same struggle reoccurred many times in the history of the Russian Revolutionary movement, and with other names. The same argument, in some form or other, continues to the present day. The book has a clear polemical slant of setting the record straight with the opportunistic tendencies within the movement.

The essential idea which runs through *What Is To Be Done?* is the need to train professional revolutionaries. In Lenin's own words, "the Social-Democrats¹ ideal should not be the trade union secretary, but *the tribune of the people*." What Lenin was driving at here was not at all a belittling of the capacity of the workers to understand but quite the opposite. His main concern was to combat the petty bourgeois prejudice that 'workers cannot understand theory' and that the party literature must confine itself to economic slogans and immediate demands. He saw a comprehensive, agitational all-Russian newspaper - generalised and concretising the experience of all oppressed strata of society - as an essential tool in this process.

Starting from the immediate problems of the working class, fighting for all kinds of partial demands, it is necessary to go beyond the particular and establish the link with the general, from the struggle of groups of workers against individual employers, to the struggle of the working class as a whole against the bourgeoisie and its state. In a brilliant line of argument, Lenin established the dialectical interrelation between agitation, propaganda, and theory and explained the way in which the small forces of Marxism, by winning over the most advanced layers of the class, can subsequently win over the mass of the proletariat, and through the latter, all other oppressed layers of society. This strategy, alongside arguing for implacable theoretical clarity, was vindicated in the monumental 1917 Bolshevik revolution.

¹ When Lenin speaks of Social-Democrats he is referring to those undertaking the struggle of the proletariat for "the abolition of the social system that compels the propertyless to sell themselves to the rich". That is, revolutionaries that seek to overthrow the capitalist system of exploitation and oppression. Today the term is associated with mild reformism, but in the early 20th Century it referred to Marxist organisations

It should be clear from Lenin's writings that the development of the revolutionary party is a complex process that goes through different stages and takes shape over a number of years and even decades. Its birth pangs can be painful and it is subject to continuous crystallisation, regroupings and even splits before emerging as a mass force. *What is to be Done?* was part of this crystallisation.

While correctly polemicising against the Economists' slavish worship of 'spontaneity', Lenin allowed himself to fall into the error of exaggerating a correct idea and turning it into its opposite. In particular, he asserts that socialist consciousness:

"[W]ould have to be brought to them [the workers] from without. The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness, i.e., the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers, and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labour legislation, etc."

This one-sided and erroneous presentation of the relationship of the working class and socialist consciousness was not an original invention of Lenin, but was borrowed directly from Kautsky, whom he regarded at that time as the main defender of orthodox Marxism against Bernstein. Lenin himself later stated he had 'bent the stick too far' one way to correct for an error of the opposite kind. History has shown many times, starting with the Chartists, that the working class in struggle can indeed arrive at a socialist consciousness. Despite this one exaggeration, Lenin's *What is to be Done?* contains a wealth of knowledge on the importance of the revolutionary party, which today deserves much greater study. In fact, Krupskaya, Lenin's wife and co-worker, urged its study "by everyone who wants to be a Leninist in deeds and not words."

Chapter I: Dogmatism and 'Freedom of Criticism'

It is no surprise that *What Is To Be Done?* opens with a quote from Lassalle to Marx: "Party struggles lend a party strength and vitality; the greatest proof of a party's weakness is its diffuseness and the blurring of clear demarcations; a party becomes stronger by purging itself." This sets the tone for the book.

Out of such clashes, there emerged a new political clarity, which provided the Party with greater cohesion and confidence. As Marx explained, the revolutionary party is a living organism, which evolves at each stage of its development. Over a period of time, the movement had attracted all kinds of accidental elements with alien ideas that played a very negative role. These opportunist pressures that existed within the movement reflect nothing other than the pressures of capitalism.

'Freedom of criticism' had become a fashionable slogan, preached by the Economists who sought to drive "Social-Democracy into trade unionist channels". This trend aimed at altering the role of the Social-Democratic party from a party of social revolution into a democratic party

of reforms. This so-called 'critical' trend is just another brand of opportunism: the freedom to introduce bourgeois ideas and bourgeois elements into the struggle for socialism.

Robacheye Dyelo was the main mouthpiece of this slogan, a newspaper that openly defended Bernstein's revisionism. The fundamental political tenet Lenin identifies as Economism is the idea of letting workers carry on the economic struggle (the struggle for better conditions for wage-labour), and leaving the political struggle to the Marxist intelligentsia and liberals. This approach is a textbook example of workerism, an attempt to lower the political level to 'bread and butter' issues as a short-cut to the masses.

As such, Lenin argues that this trend is nothing more nor less than a new variety of opportunism. This unity that they preached would allow alien class ideas and forces within the building of the revolutionary party. However, the defenders of 'freedom of criticism' cite the 1880s and 1890s as an example of how Marxist literature blossomed with the 'Broadchurch' attitude advocated by *Robacheye Dyelo*.

Lenin concedes that thanks to the alliance between the Legal Marxists, primarily bourgeois democrats, vulgarised Marxist ideas triumphed over those of Narodism. But he argues that the basis of such an alliance must be "the full opportunity for the socialists to reveal to the working class that its interests are diametrically opposed to the interests of the bourgeoisie." This would not be so if the 'critical' trend had their way, as they have long since rejected the idea of workers power and socialist revolution. The Economists complaints amounted to wanting to subordinate the movement to "eclecticism and lack of principle."

Lenin references Engels' emphasis on the importance of theoretical struggle. He attacked those who wanted a free-for-all to dilute or abandon revolutionary politics. "At this point, we wish to state only that the role of vanguard fighter can be fulfilled only by a party that is guided by the most advanced theory." In response, he was accused of an inability to compromise and of being sectarian. But Lenin warned his fellow comrades against being dragged into the "marsh" by those who wanted to take them in this direction. As he famously states:

"Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement. This idea cannot be insisted upon too strongly at a time when the fashionable preaching of opportunism goes hand in hand with an infatuation for the narrowest forms of practical activity."

Questions:

1. Can you think of any examples of workerism today?
2. In what way is pandering to the reformist milieu within the labour movement detrimental to the building of a Marxist tendency?
3. Lenin's arguments against the 'freedom of criticism' are often criticised by reformists and academics alike for supposedly planting the seeds of totalitarianism. How would you respond to this criticism?

4. In what way does *Robacheye Dyelo* distort Marx's statement that "Every step of real movement is more important than a dozen programmes"?
5. How can we best combat opportunistic tendencies within our movement?

Chapter II: The spontaneity of the Masses and the Consciousness of the Social-Democrats

Lenin begins the chapter by acknowledging that the strength of the present movement lies in the waves of strikes shaking the country. The weakness, however, lies "in the lack of consciousness and initiative among the revolutionary leaders." The awakening of the masses in the 1890s showed that the spontaneity of the movement represents consciousness in an embryonic form.

This was contrary to the prevailing opinions on such a matter. The Economists bowed down before this spontaneity, leading to Lenin's harsh criticism of this strategy. It is here that Lenin bent the proverbial stick too far, claiming that the working class, left to its own devices, can only achieve a trade unionist consciousness (i.e. the struggle for economic betterment within the confines of capitalism). The British working class, to give one example, at one point went beyond the bounds of a mere trade union consciousness. The Chartists passed from the idea of partial reforms and petitions to the idea of a general strike ('the grand national holiday') and even armed insurrection (the Newport uprising). This occurred not only before Lenin's time, but before the *Communist Manifesto* was penned.

Though it is true that Marxist theory, the highest expression of socialist consciousness, was not thrown up by the working class, the point is unfortunately taken to the extreme and becomes one-sided. Despite this, the chapter offers a wealth of information, alongside sound argumentation, as to the interrelation between the class and the leadership.

Lenin is arguing against *Rabochaya Mysl's* attempt to belittle the role of 'the conscious element', that is, the role of the Social-Democrats. He poses the question as to how one can understand the statement being put forward that the mass working class movement will determine the tasks. On the one hand, this could be taken as bowing to the spontaneity of this movement, i.e. reducing the Social-Democrats to tail-ending the growing movement. On the other hand, this could be taken to mean that the growing movement poses new theoretical, political and organisation tasks for the Social-Democrats. The Economists are inclined towards the first interpretation, lazily believing the mass movement relieves the hardship of revolutionary work. Lenin, on the contrary, understands this period as presenting definite and more complex tasks in order to harness the initiative and energy of the masses. He poses the question as follows:

"But what else is the function of Social-Democracy if not to be a "spirit" that not only hovers over the spontaneous movement, but also raises this movement to the level of "its programme"? Surely, it is not its function to drag at the tail of the movement."

Simply put, the spontaneity of the masses demands a high degree of consciousness from revolutionaries. Without an independent ideology, the masses cannot succeed in their struggles. That is why Lenin argues that the belittling of revolutionary ideas by the Economists only serves to strengthen bourgeois ideology.

Questions:

1. What is the relationship between the working class and the revolutionary leadership?
2. Can you give an example of the spontaneity of the masses going beyond trade union consciousness?
3. Why would not intervening in workers' struggles, and simply leaving it to the spontaneous movement of those involved, be a bad idea?
4. Why is dialectical materialism - the Marxist method - a crucial weapon against bourgeois ideology?

Chapter III: Trade-Unionist Politics And Social-Democratic Politics

The Economists do not reject politics wholesale, but have what Lenin describes as a purely trade-unionist conception of politics. He repudiates the idea that Social-Democratic activity should merely be that of fighting for better terms for the sale of labour-power. Social-Democrats should not limit themselves to the working classes' relation to a given group of bosses, but must broaden the horizons of the working class' relation to all classes of modern society.

On this note, Lenin argues that political education cannot be confined to "the propaganda of working class hostility to the autocracy." Similarly, the role of revolutionaries today is not to inform the working class that they are oppressed by their bosses, as it is them that experience this on a daily basis. The working class are not children to be fed on such a gruel. Instead, agitation must be carried with regard to "every concrete example" of oppression, in order to fulfill the task of developing political consciousness. This cannot be achieved if we "do not undertake the organisation of the political exposure of the autocracy in all its aspects."

Lenin rejects the slogan being put forward by the Economists for the economic struggle to be lent a political character. He points out that this is the task of trade unions, not revolutionaries. "In a word, it subordinates the struggle for reforms, as the part to the whole, to the revolutionary struggle for freedom and for socialism." It is only possible to raise the activity and consciousness of the masses when it is not limited to "political agitation on an economic basis".

This places a clear dividing line between Lenin and the Economists. Instead of focusing primarily on the way in which they are oppressed, Lenin insists that the most politically conscious layers must learn from topical events and political facts "to observe every other social

class in all the manifestations of its intellectual, ethical and political life." It is only on the basis of an all-sided political exposure - the broadest political agitation - that the work being carried out by revolutionaries can be considered "truly Social-Democratic."

Lenin describes a situation where the Social-Democrats are woefully unprepared for the events unfolding at the time, complaining that they are "lagging behind the mass movement." The masses of workers that are striking over the shameful outrages of their working conditions were more active than the Social-Democrats at the time. This is problematic as it will allow the energy of these movements to be capitalised upon by non-Social-Democratic tendencies, that will seek to convince them of the merits of bourgeois democracy. It is in this spirit of urgency that *What Is To Be Done?* is written. This is the backdrop to Lenin's conclusions of the necessity of trained revolutionary leadership, the only force able *to make conscious the unconscious desire of workers and other social stata to transform society along socialist lines.*

Questions:

1. Iskra, Lenin's paper at the time, is accused of "constantly [placing] the revolutionising of dogma higher than the revolutionising of life." Is this a fair assessment of Lenin's arguments and conclusions?
2. What is the difference between a propagandist and an agitator? Must a revolutionary be both?
3. Why is the conception of "the economic struggle as the most widely applicable means of drawing the masses into the political movement" both a reactionary and harmful one?
4. What are the similarities and differences between the Economists and the terrorists?
5. Does Lenin's claim that revolutionaries should be the "tribune of the people" exclude work within the trade unions?

Chapter IV: The Primitiveness of the Economists and the Organisation of the Revolutionaries

Lenin connects the dots in this Chapter, explaining that the economic struggle preached by the Economists does not require an all-Russia centralised organisation. This struggle, therefore, does not require an organisation that combines "all the manifestations of political opposition, protest, and indignation", and does not require professional revolutionaries. Instead of exalting amateurish methods and perspectives, Lenin unwaveringly maintains the task of Social-Democrats is to be the leadership required to overthrow capitalism.

Lenin is writing at a time where the birth pains of building a centralised, revolutionary party in conditions of secrecy due to tsarist oppression are felt. But this does not lead him to defeatism, nor the idea of bowing to spontaneity:

"The time has come when Russian revolutionaries, guided by a genuinely revolutionary theory, relying upon the genuinely revolutionary and spontaneously awakening class, can at last – at long last! – rise to full stature in all their giant strength."

Lenin argued that this organisation must consist of revolutionaries that make their revolutionary activity their profession. Within the revolutionary party, there can be no difference between workers and students: all are comrades and communists. All prejudices were left outside and were not welcome. It was not a class question, but a political one. As far as the party is concerned, students who come from a middle-class background are educated, along with worker comrades, in the ideas of Marxism. In doing so, they politically abandon their former class prejudices and come over to the standpoint of the proletariat. He writes:

"In view of this common characteristic of the members of such an organisation, all distinctions as between workers and intellectuals, not to speak of distinctions of trade and profession, in both categories, must be *effaced*."

The most central point of this Chapter is not to champion the degrading of the revolutionary to the level of the amateur. This is what the Economists would have you do. Instead, Lenin argued that the task of the party is "to raise the amateurs to the level of revolutionaries." It is only on this basis that the working class can wage a successful war against its excellently trained enemies (police and gendarmes).

There is a clear emphasis on the need for an all Russian Social-Democratic party. It is on this basis that the agitation could gain more stability, i.e. a consistent, theoretically high line. Lenin sees the past decade as being testament to this. If Social-Democracy relies on local publications, it is very easy for these to be shut down by the police, and the general continuity of the work is harmed. Local organisations should therefore put their energies into an all-Russian newspaper, providing the movement with comprehensive press agitation.

Questions:

1. Today it is fashionable for reformists to deny the essence of Lenin's position by presenting it as only valid for the conditions of tsarist Russia. Is the building of a Bolshevik Party a case of Russian exceptionalism?
2. How does Lenin address the 'anti-student' prejudices of some of his critics? How can rich students overcome their class backgrounds?
3. How does Lenin define a 'professional revolutionary'?
4. Is the emphasis on strict secrecy a phase we can expect to enter into in the coming class struggle in Britain?
5. What is the importance of centralisation for Marxists?

Chapter V: The "Plan" For an All-Russia Political Newspaper

Chapter V expands upon the tasks laid out in *Where to Begin?* elaborating a definite plan for the organisation, so that its formation may be undertaken. The plan is criticised by Nadezhin, who gives the following argument:

"We must set to work to build strong political organisations in the localities...if [these] are not trained locally, what significance will even an excellently organised all-Russia newspaper have?...[People] will find it easier to gather and organise around activities that are more concrete...the extensive organisation of local newspapers, the constant activity of local organisations among the unemployed...."

We quote in almost full since this argument isn't unique to the Russian movement at the turn of the last century. One reason that is obvious for centralising the work of producing, collating and formatting our propaganda is simply more time-efficient. But this is of second rate importance. Lenin explains, on the contrary, that it is *impossible* to train the localities without an all-Russia newspaper. The newspaper, he says, is like scaffolding. It is a temporary, secondary structure to the main article being constructed – the Revolutionary Party.

Without scaffolding, only the most simple buildings can be built. Scaffolding enables the builders to see the entire structure rather than only their little portion of it. Or, he says, it is like drawing out a guide line so that a team of bricklayers - the revolutionaries in the localities - can build their bricks next to each other, in a straight line, rather than all over the place in a mess - and can end up with an actual structure, a revolutionary party, rather than a pile of disassembled bricks. In his own words:

"The publication of an all-Russia political newspaper must be the main by which we may unswervingly develop, deepen, and expand the organisation (viz., the revolutionary organisation that is ever ready to support every protest and every outbreak)."

Nadezhdin complains that the Social-Democrats will miss the revolution itself if they resign themselves to this "bookishness". Lenin points out the absurdity of this "eve of the revolution point of view." This view boils down to the idea that it is too late now to discuss and prepare. It is clear that revolutionary organisations need time to prepare - the Bolsheviks underwent decades of careful preparation before their success in 1917. But also, as Lenin correctly argued at the time, those who made nationwide political agitation the "cornerstone of their programme" stand the least risk of missing the revolution.

Questions:

1. Organisations like Momentum and the People's Assembly are very concrete examples of how local organisations eschew centralised propaganda. In what way does this weaken their ability to fight the Tories?
2. Why do we still have a paper when we have an online website?

3. Lenin interestingly quotes Pisarev who wrote about the rift between dreams and reality. In what way did the movement at the time lack the kind of dreaming that Lenin himself was 'guilty' of?
4. What does Lenin mean when he describes the paper as a collective organiser?
5. Does having a national paper preclude having local agitation? Is this the drive of Lenin's argument, or a misunderstanding?