

# Lenin Supported Strikes as the Seeds of Working Class Self-Emancipation

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***The emancipation of the workers must be the act of the working class itself.***

(Lenin, 1995)

## Abstract

Following on from Marx and Engels, Lenin supported strikes and other forms of working class collective action. He saw these as the seeds of socialism. The confidence that strikes provided to workers made the idea of socialism appear more realistic.

The concentration of workers at the economic heart of the system creates a powerful force capable of overthrowing capitalism and creating a new socialist society based on need rather than profit. This same force can also be used to win immediate concessions.

Like Marx, Lenin argued that workers ideas change in struggle. As people try to change their conditions, their experience can challenge many of the dominant ideas in society. All strikes involve workers breaking with the routine of everyday exploitation. That process can give workers a sense of their collective strength. This enables them to win their immediate aims, but also dream and believe that another world is possible.

In "What Is To Be Done?" (1902) Lenin argued that trade union consciousness arises automatically from day to day trade union struggles. But that socialist consciousness comes from outside of this struggle. It arises from the generalisations of socialist leaders, but they learn from great events in working class history.

Marx learnt from on the experiences of workers struggling in northern English industrial towns such as Manchester, where Engels spent much of his life. Later, strikes across France, Belgium and Switzerland influenced their ideas, as did the Paris Commune. Lenin learnt that socialism was immediately on the agenda in Russia from the practical experience of the Petersburg Soviet.

In 1899 Valdimir Ilyich Lenin wrote:

*"Strikes, therefore, teach the workers to unite; they show them that they can struggle against the capitalists only when they are united; strikes teach the workers to think of the struggle of the whole working class against the whole class of factory owners and against the arbitrary, police government. This is the reason that socialists call strikes "a school of war," a school in which the workers learn to make war on their enemies for the liberation of the whole people, of all who labour, from the yoke of government officials and from the yoke of capital."*

## Introduction

Building on the writings of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (leader of the Bolsheviks during the Russian socialist revolution of 1917) supported strikes and other forms of working class collective action. He saw these as the seeds of socialism. The confidence that strikes provided to workers makes the idea of socialism as the self-emancipation of the working class appear more realistic. Successful strikes can also immediately improve the economic situation of the working class.

The concentration of workers in the economic heart of the global capitalist system creates a powerful force capable of overthrowing capitalism and creating a new socialist society based on the needs of the many rather than profit for the few. This same force can also be used to win immediate concessions from the bosses and the government. The global corrupt elite gain hugely from the current inequalities in wealth and power. We need an alternative power that has the strength to over-turn the current economic system. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels famously saw the working class as the grave diggers of capitalism in their *Communist Manifesto* (1848).

Like Marx, Lenin argued that workers ideas change during their collective struggles. As people try to change their conditions, their experience can challenge many of the dominant ideas in society. All strikes involve workers breaking with the routine of everyday exploitation. That process can give workers a sense of their collective strength. This enables them to win their immediate aims, but also to dream and believe that another world is possible. That the current society is not permanent and that if we act together and in solidarity we can change it and bring about an alternative society, socialism.

In "What Is To Be Done?" (1902) Lenin argued that trade union consciousness arises automatically from day to day trade union struggles. But that socialist consciousness comes from outside of this struggle. It arises from the generalisations from collective working class struggles by intellectuals and socialist leaders. Such theories or generalisations from historical developments are only possible if these leaders learn from the great events in working class history.

Marx learnt from on the experiences of workers struggling in northern English industrial towns such as Manchester, where Engels spent much of his life. Later, he observed and learnt from strikes across France, Belgium and Switzerland. These events influenced their ideas, as did the Paris Commune. Lenin learnt that socialism was immediately on the agenda in Russia from the practical experience of the Petersburg Soviet in 1917, before that he accepted that socialism was only possible in the industrialised countries. In Russia it had been widely accepted by socialists that the best that was possible was the removal of the feudal dictatorship that had lasted for hundreds of years.

The Marxist tradition of Lenin and the active support and solidarity with workers' strikes and other forms of collective action has largely been lost in Nigeria. Many people, even those who see themselves as progressive do not necessarily support strikes nor see them as the hope for a future socialist society. Many hope merely to develop a democratic form of capitalism in Nigeria so that the country becomes 'developed' like the west.

Like Lenin, the role of Socialist Labour is to promote the idea that socialism or a vastly more egalitarian (in terms of income and power) society is immediately possible in Nigeria. We see successful strikes like the national one in January 2012 and the one in Kaduna State in May 2022 as achieving significant reforms for the working class and the wider poor peoples. Such strikes also provide confidence to masses of people that this approach to socialism

provides the only road to socialism. A form of society where the working people themselves collectively take power and control over their own lives.

Like Russia, Nigeria is a massive multi-cultural society. The population of Russia in 1917 was around 125 million and included millions of Muslims (as well as Christians of the Russian Orthodox Church) and people who spoke many languages other than Russian. Lenin led a successful move to socialism. There is much that we can learn from those events over a hundred years ago. The most important is that we should celebrate working class strikes as the seeds of a new society, socialism.

Marxism at its foundation is centred on the idea that working-class organisation and the fighting capacity of the workers is the real agency for political change. The active participation of revolutionary socialists in the trade-union movement is essential. We celebrate every advance and analyse the setbacks, while all the time seeking to integrate that analysis into the movement. A revolutionary party in the working class has to be the memory of the class so that the lessons of the struggle are always at hand. (Westmoreland, 2023)

## **Why strikes matter – Marx and Engels first supported this argument**

Socialists have a long tradition of supporting strikes – because they show the potential of workers to transform the world (Choonara 2007). It is often taken for granted today that socialists should support strikes. But this has not always been the case. Karl Marx and his close collaborator and friend, Frederick Engels, were the first socialists in the international socialist movement to systematically argue the case for supporting workers' strikes and for socialists to be actively involved in trade unions.

They were forced to argue with many in the socialist movement who (like many in Nigeria in recent years) dismissed strikes and struggles over wages and working conditions as a diversion from the socialist struggle to gain governmental power. The arguments developed by Marx and Engels, and later Lenin, help to explain why socialists in their tradition see strikes as so important.

Marx and Engels's support for strikes was based on their vision of socialism from below – that socialism can only be brought about by the mass self-activity of the exploited working class. They argued that socialism cannot be imposed by an enlightened few through any masterplan or abstract socialist programme. Marx and Engels were scornful of those who talked about socialism but dismissed the daily struggles of workers.

They drew on the experiences of workers struggling in northern English industrial towns such as Manchester, where Engels spent much of his life. They also learnt from the strike by the matchgirls in Bow, east London, in 1888. This showed them how workers have the power to resist exploitation.

Later, strikes across France, Belgium and Switzerland also influenced their ideas. The First International, the international socialist organisation Marx and Engels were members of, played a very active part in supporting these strikes.

Marx looked at the role that strikes can play in creating the potential for socialism. In the Communist Manifesto (1848), he pointed to the dynamics that were steadily dragging more and more people across the world into capitalism. This process created two major antagonistic classes – the ruling class, which owns the factories and the workplaces, and the working class, whose labour creates the wealth and keeps the system going. Marx analysed capitalism in great detail in his major work, Capital. He showed that economic classes rather than nations are the key ways in which we should analyse society. He demonstrated how the factory owners exploit their workers. This is in contrast to some later socialists who claimed that it is industrialised countries that exploit countries in Africa and across the Global South.

The concentration of workers at the economic heart of the system, increasingly in towns and cities, created a powerful force capable of overthrowing capitalism and creating a new socialist society based on the needs of the many rather than the profits of the few.

But there is an obvious gap between the objective possibility of socialism and the reality of life under capitalism, where most people for most of the time do not think socialism is necessary or even possible. Strikes are one of the ways in which this gap can begin to be bridged.

Marx talked about the process by which the working class can go from being an objectively existing class to being a self-conscious class aware of its own power and ability to found a radically new society. He argued that the fight for socialism was necessary not just because the ruling elite wouldn't hand over power without a fight. It was also needed because a mass uprising was the means by which the atomised and divided working class could transform itself into a united class with the power to fundamentally change society.

Marx saw that ideas change in struggle, for example during strikes. As people try to change their conditions, their experience can challenge many of the dominant ideas in society.

All strikes involve workers breaking with the routine of everyday exploitation. That process can give workers a sense of their collective strength. It can raise confidence of workers, but also their friends, families and so on.

Strikes can also break down reactionary ideas such as ethnic chauvinism and sexism. In his time, Marx was particularly interested in the battle to unite English and Irish immigrant workers in Britain as well as in the situation of black workers in the US. Strikes can only be successful with working class unity and solidarity. They do not win if workers are divided by ethnic group, religion or gender.

Of course strikes are not the only form of resistance. Other struggles, campaigns and mass movements can win gains and give people a collective identity and confidence. They can forge an important sense of "us and them" against our rulers and provoke a crisis in the ruling class. However, strikes do something more – they involve a conflict at the most direct point of exploitation. They reveal something to people about the nature of capitalism and about their own collective power.

Strikes also have the ability to grow into wider struggles. Strikes can bring together politics and economics. Such moments stand in contrast to the "common sense" tradition whereby trade unions only fight over direct workplace issues and parliamentary parties fight over the political issues.

Marx argued that collective organisation, at first adopted merely as a means of defending wages, came to be pursued for its own sake; and the ensuing conflict – ‘a veritable civil war’ – served to generate among workers a consciousness of class unity, transforming them from a class ‘in itself’ to a class ‘for itself’. (The Poverty of Philosophy – 1847)

“The evolution of industrial capitalism provides the preconditions of collective organisation by throwing workers together in large numbers, and creates the deprivations which spur them to combination. This unity by transcending competition in the labour market, in itself threatens the stability of capitalism: it also develops workers class consciousness and the trains them in methods of struggle. The limited economic achievements of the unions lead workers to adopt political forms of action, and ultimately to challenge directly the whole structure of class domination.” (Hyman, 1971)

Many socialists in Marx’s day opposed “economic” strikes – over wages for example – as avoiding the question of politics. But in reality the divisions are not that simple. If formal workers in the public and private sectors are fighting for a decent minimum wage, this is a political fight with the Nigerian Federal Government. It also involves tackling the argument that wage rises cause inflation. Marx strongly refuted this argument.

In ‘Wages, Prices and Profits’ (1865) Marx argued that the level of wages was “only settled by the continuous struggle between capital and labour, the capitalist tending to reduce wages to their physical minimum, while the working man constantly presses in the other directions”.

In 1866 Marx wrote a motion to the International Working Men’s Association entitled *Trade Unions: Their Past, Present And Future*. It is arguably the first international statement that linked strikes with socialist revolution. He knew this link was not inevitable and criticised the unions for too often staying within narrow limits.

Workers learn something else from strikes. Friedrich Engels called unions “schools of war” for workers. Engels argued that “Strikes... are the military school of working men in which they prepare themselves for the great struggle that cannot be avoided” (1845, page 218). Lenin was later to use the same metaphor.

Within every strike there is a political battle. In a strike of any length the different views of how change occurs reflected in the arguments over strategy. Socialists argue for rank and file control over strikes, for reaching out to other workers, for solidarity, for the maximum self-activity of strikers in raising support and making decisions. This often comes up against those who believe in change from above. They believe strikes should be left under the control of the trade union leadership or, they argue, anarchy will arise.

Marx argued that there is also a political fight between those that want to expand the role of trade unions (taking more powers in the workplace and ultimately taking over) and those that argue for a reduced role and compromise.

Repeatedly strikes have lost, not because workers are not resolute or strong enough, but because the union leadership’s political allegiance to the APC or the Labour Party has undermined the struggle.

Ideas change in struggle, but people do not all automatically draw the same conclusions – there is an unevenness of ideas. This means that crucial to the success of strikes is the

question of politics and political organisation. But trade union organisation and strikes are the key first step to working class people understanding they have the power to change the world. Socialists need to come together in socialist organisations to more effectively argue for the ideas necessary for strikes to win and, ultimately, socialism to be achieved. This is why *Socialist Labour* exists.

### **Lenin developed Marx's ideas about strikes**

Lenin argued that socialists must involve themselves in real struggles about issues such as wages and working conditions, however limited these struggles might first appear to be. He argued that Russia was still overwhelmingly a peasant country, but modern industry was growing, and with it the all important working class (Birchall 2005, page 3).

In the factory, Lenin argued, workers began to develop socialist consciousness: "Every strike brings thoughts of socialism very forcibly to the worker's mind" (LCW, 4:315) (Birchall 2005, page 3).

Whilst in prison in 1895, Lenin wrote a draft programme for the Social Democrats (as socialists were then called), including:

"This transition of the workers to the steadfast struggle for their vital needs, the fight for concessions, for improved living conditions, wages and working hours, now begun all over Russia, means that Russian workers are making tremendous progress, and that is why the attention of the social Democratic party and all class conscious workers should be concentrated mainly on this struggle, on its promotion" (Lenin, 1895)

This economic struggle, Lenin argued {in the mid-1890s}, in the first place demonstrated to the worker the nature of economic exploitation; secondly, imbued him with a fighting spirit, and thirdly, develop his political consciousness. Class consciousness, including political consciousness, develops automatically from the economic struggle (Cliff, 1975, page 52-53).

The workers' class consciousness means the workers understanding that the only way to improve their conditions and to achieve their own emancipation is to conduct a struggle against the capitalist, the factory-owner class who owned the big factories. Further, the workers class consciousness means their understanding that the interests of all the workers are identical, that they all constitute one class, separate from all of the other classes in society. Finally, it means the workers understanding that to achieve their aims they have to work to influence the affairs of state.

The first mass strike in Russia took place under the banner of social democracy (as socialists were called then). This was a strike of textile workers in May 1896 in Saint Petersburg. The socialists, or rather those of its members who survived arrest, played a central role in the massive strike. It began as a protest against the non-payment of wages for the three day holiday celebrating the coronation of the king, Nicolai II. But it soon developed into a struggle for shorter hours and higher wages and spread to 20 of the biggest factories in Russia, employing 30,000 workers. The workers carried on the fight for the 10 1/2 hour working day for three weeks, when they finally decided to return to work, they did so as one worker in all factories at the same time. This was not only the biggest strike in Russia. It was also the first to go beyond the bounds of a single industrial plant. And the Saint Petersburg

League played a central part in it. For the first time in the long history of the socialist movement in Russia, the socialists had drawn the masses into action. Social democracy became a significant movement (Cliff 1975, page 58).

Lenin generally stressed that trade union activity pointed workers towards socialism. In "What is to be Done?" (1902) he appeared to argue the opposite: "Trade unionism means the ideological enslavement of the workers by the bourgeoisie" (LCW, 5:384). It was a huge overstatement, but Lenin was making the point that trade unions exist to improve workers' conditions within capitalism, not to get rid of the whole system. The socialist party's job was to fight for socialism – trade union struggle was a means to that end, not an end in itself. Socialist ideas would not develop automatically. The major socialist thinkers, from Marx and Engels to Lenin himself, had not been workers. Factory workers, often toiling 11 hours a day, scarcely had leisure to read, let alone write. In this context Lenin made the claim, often quoted out of context, that "class political consciousness can be brought to the workers only from without, that is, only from outside the economic struggle, from outside the sphere of relations between workers and employers" (LCW, 5:422). (Birchall 2005, page 4)

Both ideas are true. Through working class struggle, primarily successful strikes, workers begin to glimpse the possibility of using their collective power to run society, or at least their factory. But it has taken theoreticians to develop these ideas, by generalising the experience of workers, to develop the ideas of socialism and a workers state based on workers power in the factories, schools and offices.

For theoreticians to develop Marxist and Leninist ideas, we must have strikes and collective struggle by the working class. The role of theoreticians is to generalise the best experiences of the working class across the world. That is how they are able to advise us on how to organise successful strikes and ultimately to take state power and start to build socialism.

*In September 1905 St Petersburg printers went on strike over piecework pay rates and demanded payment for punctuation marks. The action rapidly spread into a general strike. Striking workplaces sent delegates to a central strike committee known as a soviet (Russian for council) – a new form of organisation. Within weeks this had 562 delegates representing 200,000 workers. It became a political body to defend the interests of the working class (Birchall 2005, page 6).*

This shows how economic trade union strikes can lead to more generalised working class political action. A very basic strike by one section of printers was the spark that led to the 1905 democratic revolution in Russia. This interplay between rising generalised confidence that change is possible, strikes and other forms of mass action continued over the years leading to the October 1917 socialist uprising in Russia led by Lenin and the Bolsheviks.

*Before 1905 the Bolsheviks had been a small minority, trying to bring socialist ideas to workers. In 1905 their job description changed radically – now their crucial task was to listen to workers and learn from them in pushing the movement forward (Birchall 2005, page 7).*

Following big student demonstrations in 1910, the number of strikes rose rapidly in 1911. The working class movement, asleep for several years, began to awake (Birchall 2005, page 8).

In February 1917 women textile workers in Petrograd went on strike, even though the Bolsheviks advised against strike action at this time. Workers were moving ahead of the party (Birchall 2005, page 12).

It came at just the right time. Earlier that month {April 1917} strikers in the Lena goldfields had been attacked by police, and hundreds were killed or injured. A wave of strikes spread across Russia. For years the Bolsheviks had organised secretly. Those habits, absolutely necessary to protect them from the police, had to be shaken off quickly. Socialists who had become used to swimming against the stream now had to learn to swim with it (Birchall 2005, page 9).

The strikes spread. A week later the Tsar fled. A Provisional Government was formed, pledged to establish universal suffrage and a constitution. During the strikes workers had revived the organisations invented in 1905, the soviets. (Birchall 2005, page 12) These are workers' councils that were to form the basis of the first socialist state led by the Bolsheviks in October 1917.

The Bolshevik party had been able to grow strong enough to take state power because workers remembered its role in earlier struggles... The party grew rapidly. At the beginning of 1917 it had about 4,000 members, by the end perhaps 250,000 (Birchall 2005, page 13).

## **Lenin's 1899 Pamphlet – "Strikes"**

In 1899, Lenin wrote a short pamphlet on strikes. We will now consider and comment on some quotations from this publication:

"strikes, which arise out of the very nature of capitalist society, signify the beginning of the working-class struggle against that system of society." (Lenin 1899)

Strikes are the standard approach that workers in all countries adopt to fight against their bosses. The earliest known strikes were by the Egyptian workers who were building the pyramids almost 3,200 years ago. Strikes were also central to the struggle to remove Hosni Mubarak in Egypt in 2011 and Omar Bashir in Sudan in 2019.

"when the workers state their demands jointly and refuse to submit to the money-bags, they cease to be slaves, they become human beings, they begin to demand that their labour should not only serve to enrich a handful of idlers, but should also enable those who work to live like human beings. The slaves begin to put forward the demand to become masters, not to work and live as the landlords and capitalists want them to, but as the working people themselves want to. Strikes, therefore, always instil fear into the capitalists, because they begin to undermine their supremacy." (Lenin 1899)

Successful strikes both reduce the level of exploitation of workers by increasing their wages, but also raise the possibility of an alternative society. If workers can organise a strike, they could also run the factory, office, university etc collectively.

"Every strike reminds the capitalists that it is the workers and not they who are the real masters—the workers who are more and more loudly proclaiming their rights. Every strike reminds the workers that their position is not hopeless, that they are not alone."



A successful strike shows workers the collective power that they have. If they can change the way that their workplace is run, the idea that another world is possible becomes a reality.

“Every strike brings thoughts of socialism very forcibly to the worker’s mind, thoughts of the struggle of the entire working class for emancipation from the oppression of capital.” (Lenin 1899)

The role of socialists and their organisations, like Socialist Labour, is to articulate and argue for the possibility of organising beyond a strike in a single workplace. We have to argue for solidarity for workers in struggle in Nigeria, across Africa and across the world. We support workers on strike because a victory for one is a victory for us all. But also because this solidarity is the best argument for a socialist world.

“A strike teaches workers to understand what the strength of the employers and what the strength of the workers consists in; it teaches them not to think of their own employer alone and not of their own immediate workmates alone but of all the employers, the whole class of capitalists and the whole class of workers.” (Lenin 1899)

Strikes consist of workers within a particular work place acting together. This solidarity often needs to be extended to general strikes across the country. So the ASUU strike in 2022 could have been won if the Nigeria Labour Congress had organised the promised general strike to force the government to agree to the university lecturers’ demands. Dangote, Nigerian banks like UBA and international companies like Shell also operate across many countries. This raises the issue of the need for international solidarity. This is also needed, for example, in the case of Niger where the Nigerian government cut off the electricity it was exporting. This formed 70% of the electricity supplied to the people of Niger. The workers of Niger needed the solidarity from their brothers and sisters in Nigeria to ensure that their electricity was turned back on.

“A strike, moreover, opens the eyes of the workers to the nature, not only of the capitalists, but of the government and the laws as well.” (Lenin 1899)

Every major strike faces a court injunction from the National Industrial Court, yet not a single state suffered court action for their failure to fully implement the N30,000 minimum wage three and a half years after Buhari signed it into law. The police invariably attack protests by workers, students and poor people. They do not protect us from the failure of state or local governments to pay our salaries.

“The government itself knows full well that strikes open the eyes of the workers and for this reason it has such a fear of strikes and does everything to stop them as quickly as possible.” (Lenin 1899)

So governments will often offer talks if the trade unions call off strikes. In contrast, because we cannot trust them to implement agreements that they have signed, we need to continue strikes until we receive the necessary bank alerts.

Strikes make it clear that that in reality we should not be divided by ethnic group, religion, gender or nationality. Strikes teach us that there are only two groups in the world. We are the majority, the workers and labouring classes. They are the tiny corrupt elite that use their power to exploit us.

“Strikes are *one* of the ways in which the working class struggles for its emancipation, but they are not the only way; and if the workers do not turn their attention to other means of conducting the struggle, they will slow down the growth and the successes of the working class.”

We need to extend strikes to include town hall meetings, protests and demonstrations. Strikes need to be actively organised and cannot just be restricted to stay at homes.

“strikes, as we have seen, show the workers that the government is their enemy and that a struggle against the government must be carried on. Actually, it is strikes that have gradually taught the working class of all countries to struggle against the governments for workers’ rights and for the rights of the people as a whole. As we have said, only a socialist workers’ party can carry on this struggle by spreading among the workers a true conception of the government and of the working-class cause.”

Socialist organisations, like Socialist Labour, should be consistently arguing for solidarity and support for striking workers. We need to encourage all trade unions to organise effectively in all work places. We cannot afford to accept bans on trade unions in organisations like the customs and immigration services. Trade unions need to ensure that their full wages are paid each month on or before the 25<sup>th</sup>. The NLC has a standing order that strikes should be held if wages are not paid by this date.

### **Lenin’s “What is to be Done?” – Why socialists call strikes “a school of war”**

“What is to be Done?” (Lenin, 1902) had two main aims: first to persuade the numerous scattered Russian social democratic (socialist) organisations and groups to come together in a single national party, the Russian Social Democratic Party (the Bolsheviks), around a core of professional revolutionaries and an all-Russian newspaper, and second to combat the trend in the Russian socialist movement known as “economism” (Molyneux, 2017).

The “economists” argued that the main task of social democrats (now called socialists) in Russia was to concentrate on assisting the economic struggles of the workers, without raising political demands such as “Down with the Autocracy!” Lenin took the view that it was essential for socialists to raise political demands within the workers’ movement and especially the demand for the downfall of autocracy (Molyneux, 2017).

Lenin definitely supported strikes that he saw as the bedrock of working class struggles for socialism. His argument was that socialists should argue to extend and deepen strikes and their demands to include relevant political demands. This is clearly relevant in Nigeria today. We need more strikes to be able to have a successful working class movement that can win at least our basic demands over a decent minimum wage and the price of petrol, but also to fight against the hike in university tuition fees and attempts to introduce “no work – no pay”. These should all be included in the basic demands of the NLC and TUC.

In the process of making his case against economism Lenin wrote in relation to the strikes in Russia in the 1890s:

Taken by themselves, these strikes were simply trade union struggles, not yet Social Democratic struggles. They marked the awakening antagonisms between workers and employers; but the workers, were not, and could not be, conscious of the irreconcilable

antagonism of their interests to the whole of the modern political and social system, ie, theirs was not yet Social-Democratic consciousness. In this sense, the strikes of the nineties, despite the enormous progress they represented as compared with the “revolts”, remained a purely spontaneous movement.

Then he added the observation that:

We have said that there could not have been Social-Democratic consciousness among the workers. It would have to be brought to them 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, ie, 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. The theory of socialism, however, grew out of the philosophic, historical, and economic theories elaborated by educated representatives of the propertied classes, by intellectuals. By their social status the founders of modern scientific socialism, Marx and Engels, themselves belonged to the bourgeois intelligentsia. In the very same way, in Russia, the theoretical doctrine of Social-Democracy arose altogether independently of the spontaneous growth of the working-class movement; it arose as a natural and inevitable outcome of the development of thought among the revolutionary socialist intelligentsia. (pp31-32)

This argument, and this passage, have been seized on by numerous, generally anti-Marxist, writers as representing Lenin’s real or fundamental attitude to the working class and presented also as a core or defining doctrine of Bolshevism and Leninism. They suggest it shows that Lenin had a sceptical and condescending view of the political capacities of the working class, and believed that left to their own devices working class people would not become socialists. Consequently it would be necessary for middle class intellectuals, like him, to impose socialist consciousness and goals on the working class by means of an authoritarian centralised party.

In fact Lenin’s specific formulation here is “one-sided and therefore erroneous” as Trotsky was to put it many years later. It was mistaken in terms of its account of the historical development of Marxism in that while the “theory of socialism [was] elaborated by educated representatives of the propertied classes, by intellectuals” this did not occur “independently of the spontaneous growth of the working-class movement” but was profoundly influenced by it. There would have been no Marxism without the communist workers Marx met in Paris, or the Silesian weavers’ revolt or the mass Chartist movement in Britain. And this influence of the working class struggle on the development of Marxist theory was to continue through the 1848 Revolutions, the struggle for the 10-hour day, the Paris Commune and beyond. And the claim that “the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness” was disproved in practice in both the 1905 Revolution and in 1917. But the fact that this formulation is a mistaken one does not at all justify the construction and weight put on it by so many anti-Leninists.

Lars Lih, in his major study, *Lenin Rediscovered* (2008), argues, and demonstrates with much evidence, that of all the socialist writers in Russia at the time, Lenin was the most consistently enthusiastic and optimistic about the potential politicisation of the working class. In contrast many of Lenin’s critics who appear to condemn him for his negative appraisal, in “What is to be Done?”, of working class consciousness, actually share the view that workers will never become socialist unless it is imposed on them from above just as capitalist governments and the capitalist media generally think that “ordinary” people are

only interested in “bread-and-butter” issues and that any sign of them becoming politicised must be the result of malicious “outside” influences.

While he was in prison in 1895-1896 the young Lenin wrote the Draft of a Programme for an as yet non-existent Russian Social Democratic party. The draft focuses overwhelmingly on the development and role of the working class.

Here are some extracts:

“Big factories are developing in Russia with ever growing rapidity, ruining the small handicraftsmen and peasants, turning them into propertyless workers...the big factories are creating a special class of workers which is enabled to wage a struggle against capital... This struggle of the working class against the capitalist class is a struggle against all classes who live by the labour of others, and against all exploitation. It can only end in the passage of political power into the hands of the working class... The movement of the Russian working class is, according to its character and aims, part of the international (Social-Democratic) movement of the working class of all countries...The emancipation of the workers must be the act of the working class itself. (Lenin, 1995)

From this point on in his life, Lenin’s conviction was that Marxism is the theory of the working class and socialism is its emancipation through its own mass actions, primarily strikes. However, Lenin accepted (until 1917) that the revolution would not ultimately go beyond the limits of bourgeois democracy, but he insisted that the proletariat would have to lead the revolution.

Thus Lenin’s specific analysis of the nature of the Russian Revolution confirmed and reinforced his general Marxist commitment to the working class. Not only was the proletariat the revolutionary and socialist class in general world historical terms, but it was the class called on to lead the overthrow of the autarchy of feudal Tsarism in Russia in the immediate present.

As a consequence of this, right through all Lenin’s writings, not just in major programmatic or theoretical texts but in the most minor documents as well, he refers constantly to the “revolutionary proletariat”, “the proletariat, the advanced class”, the “class-conscious proletarians”, “the Social Democrats who are the Party of the proletariat”, etc. Almost always, Lenin speaks and writes in the name of “the proletariat”—both international and Russian—and not, for example, of “the left” or “the radical left” or as a “radical intellectual”. This is not in an egotistical or substitutionist way—in so far as he refers to himself at all it is usually as only a “publicist”. He is not speaking of the proletariat as “his followers” in the way union leaders often speak of the workers as “my members” but with a combination of admiration and confidence about what they have achieved and what he is convinced they will achieve and in a spirit of total identification.

Here are a few extracts from different periods of Lenin’s writings that can perhaps give the reader a flavour (emphasis added throughout).

From 1901:

“The Editorial Board of Iskra joins whole-heartedly in celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the revolutionary activity of G V Plekhanov. May this celebration

serve to strengthen the positions of revolutionary Marxism, which alone can guide the world struggle of the proletariat for emancipation.”

From 1907:

“When the Social-Democrats, from an analysis of Russia’s economic realities, deduced the leading role, the hegemony of the proletariat in our revolution, this seemed to be a bookish infatuation of theoreticians. The revolution [of 1905] confirmed our theory... The proletariat actually took the lead in the revolution all the time. The Social-Democrats actually proved to be the ideological vanguard of the proletariat.”

From 1912:

“Events [mass strikes in response to the shooting of strikers in the Lena goldfield] show that the tradition of the revolutionary mass strike lives on among the workers and that the workers at once took up and revived this tradition. The Russian revolution was the first to develop on a large scale this proletarian method of agitation, of rousing and uniting the masses and of drawing them into the struggle. Now the proletariat is applying this method once again and with an even firmer hand. No power on earth could achieve what the revolutionary vanguard of the proletariat is achieving by this method.”

From 1915:

“The only class in Russia that they did not succeed in infecting with chauvinism is the proletariat. Only the most ignorant strata of the workers were involved in the few excesses that occurred at the beginning of the war. The part played by workers in the Moscow anti-German riots was greatly exaggerated. In general, and on the whole, the working class of Russia proved to be immune to chauvinism. This is to be explained by the revolutionary situation in the country and by the general conditions of life of the Russian proletariat.”

The first relationship of Russian Marxists with workers was through Marxist study circles. These involved a tiny minority of “advanced” workers who were keen to educate themselves. However, in 1894-1895, the year before his arrest, and as strikes started to mount in Russia, Lenin threw himself enthusiastically into factory agitation. He wrote a detailed “Explanation of the Law on Fines Imposed on Factory Workers” and leaflets for the workers of the Thornton Works and other factories in St Petersburg. The leaflets were written on the basis of personally interviewing and questioning individual workers in great detail about their working conditions. In her memoirs, Lenin’s wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya, offered a vivid account of how this information was painstakingly collected and made the following observation about the significance of this episode:

“This St Petersburg period of Vladimir Ilyich’s {Lenin} work was of great importance, although the work itself was not noteworthy and hardly noticeable. He had described it so himself. It did not show. It was a matter not of heroic deeds but of establishing close contact with the masses, getting closer to them, learning to be the vehicle of their finest aspirations, learning how to win their confidence, and rally them behind us. But it was during this period of his St Petersburg work that Vladimir Ilyich was moulded as a leader of the working masses.”

Thus, Lenin at this time first established an organic relationship with Russian workers, a dialectical relationship of learning and teaching. Moreover, Lenin maintains this organic relationship, and in particular the ability to learn from the working class, through years of exile because of his intense hands-on involvement (theoretical, journalistic and organisational) with the Bolshevik Party and its implantation in the class.

Two examples illustrate this very clearly. The first is the question of the Soviet in 1905. Many of the “professional revolutionaries”, including the Bolshevik Petersburg Committee with whom Lenin had built the party in the period 1903-1904, responded in a very suspicious and sectarian way to the emergence of the Petersburg Soviet in 1905. They saw in this new institution a potential rival to the influence of the party and tried to demand that the Soviet adopt the party’s programme or even formally affiliate to it. Trotsky comments, “The Petersburg soviet as a whole, including the contingent of Bolshevik working people as well, ignored this ultimatum without batting an eyelash”.

The second is a story Lenin recounts in his booklet *Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?* regarding the July Days in 1917. Even slightly edited it is a lengthy quote but worth it because it is very revealing of Lenin’s outlook:

“After the July days... I was obliged to go underground. Of course, it was the workers who sheltered people like us. In a small working-class house in a remote working-class suburb of Petrograd, dinner is being served. The hostess puts bread on the table. The host says: “Look what fine bread. “They” dare not give us bad bread now. And we had almost given up even thinking that we’d ever get good bread in Petrograd again.”

I was amazed at this class appraisal of the July days. My thoughts had been revolving around the political significance of those events, weighing the role they played in the general course of events, analysing the situation that caused this zigzag in history and the situation it would create, and how we ought to change our slogans and alter our Party apparatus to adapt it to the changed situation. As for bread, I, who had not known want, did not give it a thought. I took bread for granted, as a by-product of the writer’s work, as it were. The mind approaches the foundation of everything, the class struggle for bread, through political analysis that follows an extremely complicated and devious path.

This member of the oppressed class, however, even though one of the well-paid and quite intelligent workers, takes the bull by the horns with that astonishing simplicity and straightforwardness, with that firm determination and amazing clarity of outlook from which we intellectuals are as remote as the stars in the sky... “What a painful thing is this “exceptionally complicated situation” created by the revolution,” that’s how the bourgeois intellectual thinks and feels.

“We squeezed “them” a bit; “they” won’t dare to lord it over us as they did before. We’ll squeeze again—and chuck them out altogether,” that’s how the worker thinks and feels. (page 34)

What these examples illustrate and what the totality of Lenin’s writing and political activity demonstrates is a deep theoretical and practical commitment to the working class struggle for its emancipation and an adoption of what Lukács called “the standpoint of the

proletariat" not just as a theoretical abstraction but also as an organic and profoundly internalised world outlook.

What is the role of strikes, both economic and political, and trade unions in the revolutionary process? In every past mass revolution without exception a conflict has emerged between those who wanted to push the struggle through to, in Marx's words, "the revolutionary reconstitution of society at large" and those who, judging that to be impossible or too risky, seek a compromise with the existing order. Socialists have to be the ones that always argue to extend and deepen the struggle we cannot be satisfied with the crumbs we want to take over the bakery.

## **What is to be Done? 1902 Lenin**

In 1902 Lenin published "What is to be Done?", in which he set out his thoughts on how socialists should organise. Many of Lenin's critics, and some of his supporters, use this book as a statement of his views on what revolutionary organisation should be at all times and places. This is nonsense. Lenin was writing for one particular set of circumstances. What is to be Done? is a historical document rather than a universal recipe. Yet it contains some important arguments that are still relevant today (Birchall, 2005).

Strikes are assumed to be the bedrock of socialist activism as the following quotations from "What is to be done?" show:

"in the middle of the nineties... the strikes that followed the famous St. Petersburg industrial war of 1896 assumed a similar general character. Their spread over the whole of Russia clearly showed the depth of the newly awakening popular movement" (page 21)

"Strikes occurred in Russia in the seventies and sixties (and even in the first half of the nineteenth century), and they were accompanied by the "spontaneous" destruction of machinery, etc. Compared with these "revolts", the strikes of the nineties might even be described as "conscious", to such an extent do they mark the progress which the working-class movement made in that period." (page 21)

"The strikes of the nineties revealed far greater flashes of consciousness; definite demands were advanced, the strike was carefully timed, known cases and instances in other places were discussed, etc. The revolts were simply the resistance of the oppressed, whereas the systematic strikes represented the class struggle in embryo, but only in embryo. Taken by themselves, these strikes were simply trade union struggles, not yet Social Democratic struggles." (page 22)

"Even in the most advanced countries of Europe it can still be seen that the exposure of abuses in some backward trade, or in some forgotten branch of domestic industry, serves as a starting-point for the awakening of class-consciousness, for the beginning of a trade union struggle, and for the spread of socialism.

"The overwhelming majority of Russian Social-Democrats have of late been almost entirely absorbed by this work of organising the exposure of factory conditions." (page 39)

Given the stage of development of Russian capitalism, the aim of the social democrats (socialists) was “the overthrow of the autocracy” (page 32) rather than the achievement of socialism directly (it was only in 1917 that Lenin came to this view).

However, Lenin argued that “Social-Democracy leads the struggle of the working class, not only for better terms for the sale of labour-power {economic demands}, but for the abolition of the social system that compels the propertyless to sell themselves to the rich {political emancipation}... it follows that not only must Social-Democrats not confine themselves exclusively to the economic struggle” (page 38)

“The economic struggle is the collective struggle of the workers against their employers for better terms in the sale of their labour-power, for better living and working conditions. This struggle is necessarily a trade union struggle, because working conditions differ greatly in different trades, and, consequently, the struggle to improve them can only be conducted on the basis of trade organisations” (page 42)

“Revolutionary Social-Democracy has always included the struggle for reforms as part of its activities. But it utilises “economic” agitation for the purpose of presenting to the government, not only demands for all sorts of measures, but also (and primarily) the demand that it cease to be an autocratic government. Moreover, it considers it its duty to present this demand to the government on the basis, not of the economic struggle alone, but of all manifestations in general of public and political life. In a word, it subordinates the struggle for reforms, as the part to the whole, to the revolutionary struggle for freedom and for socialism.” (page 43)

“The “economic struggle of the workers against the employers and the government”, about which you make as much fuss as if you had discovered a new America, is being waged in all parts of Russia, even the most remote, by the workers themselves who have heard about strikes, but who have heard almost nothing about socialism.” (page 50)

Of course Lenin supported strikes as the universal weapon of the working class, but socialists have to argue for going beyond economic demands for higher wages (that of course we always support) to support clearly political demands. Economism is not the support of strikes, but restricting our and working class demands to economic rather than political demands. These are not clearly different, a strike for an increase in the minimum wage is clearly a political demand.

“For the secretary of any, say English, trade union 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 (i. e., to warn all and sundry that a strike is proceeding at a certain factory), explains the partiality of arbitration court judges who belong to the bourgeois classes, etc., etc. In a word, every trade union secretary conducts and helps to conduct “the economic struggle against the employers and the government”. 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 generalise all these manifestations and produce a single picture of



police violence and capitalist exploitation; 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.” (page 54)

“our task is to utilise every manifestation of discontent, and to gather and turn to the best account every protest, however small.” (page 57)

“The ideal audience for political exposure is the working class, which is first and foremost in need of all-round and live political knowledge, and is most capable of converting this knowledge into active struggle, even when that struggle does not promise “palpable results”. (page 59)

The success of economic demands by the workers in their trade union can then give confidence to other strata of society:

“The proletarian struggle spread to new strata of the workers and extended to the whole of Russia, at the same time indirectly stimulating the revival of the democratic spirit among the students and among other sections of the population.” (page 116-7)

There is no basis for the claim, so often made, that “What is to be Done?” was the basic document of Bolshevism or Leninism. Rather it was a polemical work written to combat “economism”. Lenin, himself, made this very clear, in the Preface he wrote in 1907 when “What is to be Done?” and other texts from the period were republished:

The basic mistake made by those who now criticise *What Is To Be Done?* is to treat the pamphlet apart from its connection with the concrete historical situation of a definite, and now long past, period in the development of our Party...

*What Is To Be Done?* is a summary of Iskra tactics and Iskra organisational policy in 1901 and 1902. Precisely a “summary”, no more and no less.

Nor... did I have any intention of elevating my own formulations, as given in *What Is To Be Done?*, to “programmatically” level, constituting special principles. On the contrary, the expression I used—and it has since been frequently quoted—was that the Economists had gone to one extreme.

*What Is To Be Done?*, I said, straightens out what had been twisted by the Economists... The meaning of these words is clear enough: *What Is To Be Done?* is a controversial correction of Economist distortions and it would be wrong to regard the pamphlet in any other light.

It is clear that under the impact of the great spontaneous mass struggles that broke out in the 1905 Revolution, which included the formation of the Petersburg Soviet, a major advance on trade unionism, Lenin changed his position. In the Preface to his important brochure “Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution” he writes, “At such a time the working class feels an instinctive urge for open revolutionary action”. After 1905 Lenin never repeated the clumsy “socialism from the outside” formula.

## **Economic and Political Strikes V. I. Lenin (1912)**

In 1912, Lenin wrote about his views on “Economic and Political Strikes”. In this pamphlet he argued that:

“In a political strike, the working class comes forward as the advanced class of the whole people. In such cases, the proletariat plays not merely the role of one of the classes of bourgeois society, but the role of guide, vanguard, leader. The political ideas manifested in the movement involve the whole people, i.e., they concern the basic, most profound conditions of the political life of the whole country. This character of the political strike, as has been noted by all scientific investigators of the period 1905–07, brought into the movement all the classes, and particularly, of course, the widest, most numerous and most democratic sections of the population, the peasantry, and so forth.”

“The strike movement was strongest in 1905. And what was the result? We see that in that year the workers achieved the greatest improvements in their condition. Government statistics show that in 1905 *only* 29 out of every 100 strikers stopped their fight without having gained *anything*, i.e., were completely defeated. In the previous ten years (1895–1904), as many as 52 strikers out of 100 stopped fighting without having gained anything! It follows that the large scale of the struggle contributed immensely to its *success*, almost doubling it.”

## Conclusions

Within the socialist movement, there are two distinct traditions. The American socialist, Hal Draper described them as ‘socialism from below’ and ‘socialism from above’.

Socialism from below is the tradition of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Rosa Luxemburg and others. It sees socialism as the self-emancipation of the working class. Socialist Labour sees itself in this tradition. We believe that workers strikes are the kernel of class struggle. Strikes are the main way that workers can win concessions from the bosses and governments now. They are also the seeds of the future socialist society. This is the tradition of social movement or class struggle trade unionism.

Socialism from above is the tradition of what is now called social democracy. It is the politics of the Labour Party in Britain and the ANC in South Africa. They believe that workers should be patient enough until economic conditions allow minor reforms to be implemented that will benefit workers. It is also the tradition of many people who describe themselves of progressives or socialists in Nigeria.

They see their primary objective is to help to develop the economy of Nigeria. Once that is achieved then the fruits of such development can be shared with the majority of the population. From their perspective, strikes are disruptive and hold-back the development of the country. Strikes, at best, should only be used as a last resort to encourage the government to enter into negotiations. Once the government meets with the trade union leaders, then the strikes should be suspended.

This approach has not been successful in Nigeria, as it has also failed in all countries where it has been adopted. In the last 25 years there has been major economic growth and development within Nigeria, but all the gains of this development have been stolen by the corrupt elite. Members of trade unions are now almost all poorer than they were five, 10 or even 20 years ago. In contrast the ruling elite are now richer than in their wildest dreams at the end of the military era.

As Valdimir Ilyich Lenin said:

“Strikes, therefore, teach the workers to unite; they show them that they can struggle against the capitalists only when they are united; strikes teach the workers to think of the struggle of the whole working class against the whole class of factory owners and against the arbitrary, police government. This is the reason that socialists call strikes “a school of war,” a school in which the workers learn to make war on their enemies for the liberation of the whole people, of all who labour, from the yoke of government officials and from the yoke of capital.” (Lenin 1899)

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