

TOWARDS AN ALTERNATIVE REVOLUTIONARY PRAXIS

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“The emancipation of the working class is the task of the workers themselves”.
Marx.

LENIN ON “WHAT IS TO BE DONE?”

Quite many a Marxist the world over still continue to base their understanding of party organization on the model of “What is to be Done” which Lenin wrote as far back as 1902 and that too, in the context of a specific set of conditions of Czarist autocracy and general political immobility of the masses. In simple terms, there was no freedom of assembly, organization, agitation and demonstration etc. due to complete ban on these activities by the Czarist authorities. Secondly, there was absence of any countrywide social-political-economic movement by the masses themselves except some scattered and sporadic movements on purely economic demands here and there. Thirdly, to break through such a reactionary stalemate, there was no countrywide party or organization of the proletariat capable of connecting and coordinating the scattered movements into an all-national powerful bulwark of people’s struggle against the Czarist autocracy. What existed then were merely a number of circles, narrow in their framework and secret in their operation, professing though, a variety of radical views on different issues. Such were the circumstances that stared Lenin in face when he authored ‘What is to be Done?’.

The considerations that prompted Lenin to present the model of ‘What is to be Done?’ in the said circumstances were; [1] to group together a band of ‘professional revolutionaries’ who can break through the stalemate created by Czarist coercion, and who can exercise leadership over every issue of people’s movement and as well on every problem theoretical or organizational inside the party; [2] to bring up a rank and file of general members absolutely loyal and disciplined before the central committee consisting of professional revolutionaries; [3] to train and school all the members of the party in secret, underground modus operandi as contrasted with open and democratic procedures; [4] to emphasise the aspect of theoretical-ideological purity so as to overcome the disunity and disarray existing among the narrow secret circles; and help them coalesce into and work under one all-national centralized leadership; and [5] last but not the least, to assist the proletariat disunited as they were in the process of forming and consolidating themselves into a class through the organization of professional revolutionaries. Lenin’s emphasis [rather, overemphasis, now retrospectively speaking] on the aspect of professional revolutionaries, centralization, loyalty, discipline, leadership of the Central Committee, ideological uniformity and so on and so forth was thus necessitated by the peculiar, specific conditions that existed in the then Russia. As soon as those conditions were overcome, Lenin lost no time in shifting the emphasis from this aspect to the other such as regular holding of the congress, election of all bodies, complete exposure of inner-party struggles before the masses, relaxation of the rules of membership, induction of general workers into the position of leadership, mass enrolment of members, greater faith in the spontaneity of the masses, more

friendliness towards other fraternal parties, united movement from below and so on and so forth. No body can show one, uniform and consistent model of party organization running in Lenin all through. The very Lenin who said that workers left to themselves produced only trade union consciousness as contrasted with social-democratic consciousness, and socialism could be brought to them only from without [What is to be Done?] had no hesitation in saying only after 3 years that “the working class is instinctively, spontaneously social-democratic [Reorganisation of the Party Nov.1905]. Apparently inconsistent, yes; but there is one profound consistency-consistency with truth, the ever changing life, reality and the world around. Accordingly, Lenin changes the model of Party organization from one type to another depending upon the nature of circumstances. Those who quote Lenin’s writings of a particular time and raise them into universal principles of Leninist conception of party organization are apt to miss the real Lenin, the whole Lenin, the ever-dynamic Lenin, in a word, the revolutionary Lenin. Most of what passes off before our very eyes as Leninism suffers from the fallacy of equating a part as the whole, the trunk as tree, an organ as organism and likewise.

Those who want to be a part of the proletariat’s ongoing movement for self- emancipation as Lenin was, should first of all undertake an objective, comprehensive and in-depth study of the entire gamut of circumstances facing the proletariat within and outside a country so as to deduce the principles of organization there-from, instead of picking up some utterances of Lenin made at a particular juncture, in the face of a peculiar, unique, set of circumstances of the then Russia, and imposing them on the proletariat in the name of the universal principles of Leninist party organization, or reversely speaking, dovetailing, pigeonholing the proletariat into own subjective, fanciful, sectarian party mould of theirs.

Those who are still guided by the model of ‘What is to be Done?’ [1902] should do well to go through Lenin’s notes on this book made only after five years of its publication appended herewith. There were numerous occasions throughout Lenin’s life when he sought revision of his 1902 model in accordance with changing circumstances. Even the world famous guideline on principles of party organization, approved in the 3rd Congress of the Comintern [1922] which retains Lenin’s vanguardist conception of party did not miss to keep it on record; “there are no absolutely infallible standards of party organization”.

It only speaks of the relativity, temporariness, conditional nature and limited relevance of the Comintern’s principles as of all other earlier models enunciated by Lenin from time to time, notwithstanding how sacrosanct we may be holding them now.

To demonstrate by way of example as to how Lenin sought to revise his 1902 model, here follows a bunch of excerpts from Lenin’s Preface to the “Collection Twelve Years” written in 1907 [see Lenin Collected Works Vol-13].

Lenin’s Preface to the Collection Twelve years

The next pamphlet “What is to be Done” was published abroad early in 1902. It is a criticism of the Right Wing, which was no longer a literary trend but existed within the Social-Democratic organization.

There was, in fact, no united party,: unity was still an idea, a directive.

What is to be Done? gives a systematic account of the reasons for the divergence of views and of the nature of Iskra tactics and organizational activity.

The basic mistake made by those who now criticize “What is to be Done?” is to treat the pamphlet apart from its connexion 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 organizational policy in 1901 and 1902. Precisely a summary, no more and no less.

Despite the split, the Social-Democratic party earlier than any of the other parties was able to take advantage of the temporary spell of freedom to build a legal organization with an ideal democratic structure, an electoral system and representation at Congresses according to the number of organized members. You will not find this, even to-day either in the Socialist-Revolutionary or the Cadet parties, though the latter is practically legal, is the best organized bourgeois party, and has incomparably greater funds, scope for using the press, and opportunities for legal activities than our party.

The question arises, who accomplished, who brought into being this superior unity, solidarity, and stability of our party? It was accomplished by the organization of professional revolutionaries, to the building of which Iskra made the greatest contribution.

Basically, of course, their success was due to the fact that the working class, whose best representatives built the Social-Democratic party, for objective economic reasons, possesses a greater capacity for organization than any other class in capitalist society. Without this condition, an organization of professional revolutionaries would be nothing more than a plaything, an adventure, a mere signboard. ‘What is to be Done’ repeatedly emphasizes this, pointing out that the organization it advocates has no meaning apart from its connexion with the “genuinely revolutionary class that is spontaneously rising to struggle”.

In the historical conditions that prevailed in Russia in 1900-1905, no organization other than Iskra could have created the Social-Democratic Labour Party we now have. The professional revolutionary has played his part in the history of Russian proletarian socialism. No power on earth can now undo this work, which has outgrown the narrow framework of the circles of 1902-5.

I have just referred to the narrow framework of the circles of the old Iskra period [beginning with issue no. 51, at the close of 1903, Iskra turned to Menshevism, proclaiming that “a gulf separates the old and new Iskra....]. This circle spirit has to be briefly explained to the present day reader. The pamphlets ‘What is to be Done?’ and ‘One Step Forward, Two Steps Back’ . . . present to the reader a heated, at times bitter and destructive, controversy within the circles abroad. Undoubtedly this struggle has so many unattractive features. Undoubtedly, it is something that could only be possible in a young and immature workers’ movement in the country in question. Undoubtedly, the present leaders of the present workers’ movement in Russia will have to break

with many of the circle traditions, forget and discard many of the trivial features of circle activity and circle squabbles, so as to concentrate on the tasks of Social-Democracy in the present period. Only the broadening of the party by enlisting proletarian elements can, in conjunction with open mass activity, eradicate all the residue of the circle spirit which has been inherited from the past and is unsuited to our present tasks. And the transition to a democratically organized workers' party, proclaimed by the Bolsheviks in Novaya Zhim in Nov. 1905, i.e., as soon as the conditions appeared for legal activity- this transition was virtually an irrevocable break with the old circle ways that outlived their day.

The circles were necessary in their day and played a positive role. In an autocratic state, especially in one situation created by the whole history of the Russian revolutionary movement, the socialist worker's party could not develop except from these circles. And the circles, i.e., close-knit, exclusive groups uniting a very small number of people and nearly always based on personal friendship, were a necessary stage in the development of socialism and the workers' movement in Russia. As the movement grew, it was confronted with the task of uniting these circles, forming strong links between them, and establishing continuity. This called for a firm base of operations beyond the reach of the autocracy i.e., abroad. The circles abroad, therefore, came into being through necessity. There was no contact between them; they had no authority over them in the shape of the party in Russia, and it was inevitable that they should differ in their understanding of the movement's main tasks at the given stage, an understanding of how exactly to set up a base of operations and in what way they could help to build the party as a whole.

The Circle played their part and are now, of course, obsolete. But they became obsolete only because the struggle that they waged posed the key problems of the Social-Democratic movement in the sharpest possible manner and solved them in an irreconcilable revolutionary spirit, thereby creating a firm basis for broad party activity.

Hence it is clear that the controversy was essentially between the Iskrarists and the Economists, who attacked what was common, both to 'What is to be Done?' and the programme drafts. Not at the Second Congress did I have any intention of elevating my own formulations, as given in 'What is to be Done?' to programmatic 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..... I emphasized that just because we were so vigorously straightening out whatever had been twisted our line of action would always be the straightest.

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.

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