Modern History Sourcebook:
Vladimir Illyich Lenin:
What is to be Done, 1902

In this text, Lenin makes his argument for a coherent, strictly controlled party of dedicated revolutionaries as a basic necessity for a revolution. Some have seen an analogy with the Jesuit Order in his proposals for an elite corps to lead the masses. One may see in Lenin’s proposals a deep insight into necessary requisites for a revolution, or a deep contempt for the working classes.

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., it may itself realise the necessity for combining in unions, for fighting against the employers and for striving to compel the government to pass necessary labour legislation, etc. The theory of socialism, however, grew out of the philosophic, historical and economic theories that were elaborated by the educated representatives of the propertied classes, the intellectuals. According to their social status, the founders of modern scientific socialism, Marx and Engels, themselves belonged to the bourgeois intelligentsia. Similarly, in Russia, the theoretical doctrine of Social Democracy [Note: By "social democracy" Lenin means revolutionary political Marxism, not the later concept of "moderate" socialism] arose quite independently of the spontaneous growth of the labour movement; it arose as a natural and inevitable outcome of the development of ideas among the revolutionary socialist intelligentsia. At the time of which we are speaking, i.e., the middle of the nineties, this doctrine not only represented the completely formulated programme of the Emancipation of Labour group, but had already won the adherence of the majority of the revolutionary youth in Russia.

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It is only natural that a Social Democrat, who conceives the political struggle as being identical with the "economic struggle against the employers and the government," should conceive of an "organisation of revolutionaries" as being more or less identical with an "organisation of workers." And this, in fact, is what actually happens; so that when we talk about organisation, we literally talk in different tongues. I recall a conversation I once had with a fairly consistent Economist, with whom I had not been previously acquainted. We were discussing the pamphlet Who Will Make the Political Revolution? and we were very soon agreed that the principal defect in that brochure was that it ignored the question of organisation. We were beginning to think that we were in complete agreement with each other—but as the conversation proceeded, it became clear that we were talking of different things. My interlocutor accused the author of the brochure just mentioned of ignoring strike funds, mutual aid societies, etc.; whereas I had in mind an organisation of revolutionaries as an essential factor in "making" the political revolution. After that became clear, I hardly remember a single question of importance upon which I was in agreement with that Economist!

What was the source of our disagreement? The fact that on questions of organisation and
politics the Economists are forever lapsing from Social Democracy into trade unionism. The political struggle carried on by the Social Democrats is far more extensive and complex than the economic struggle the workers carry on against the employers and the government. Similarly (and indeed for that reason), the organisation of a revolutionary Social-Democratic Party must inevitably differ from the organisations of the workers designed for the latter struggle. A workers' organisation must in the first place be a trade organisation; secondly, it must be as wide as possible; and thirdly, it must be as public as conditions will allow (here, and further on, of course, I have only autocratic Russia in mind). On the other hand, the organisations of revolutionaries must consist first and foremost of people whose profession is that of a revolutionary (that is why I speak of organisations of revolutionaries, meaning revolutionary Social Democrats). In view of this common feature of the members of such an organisation, all distinctions as between workers and intellectuals, and certainly distinctions of trade and profession, must be obliterated. Such an organisation must of necessity be not too extensive and as secret as possible.

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I assert:

that no movement can be durable without a stable organisation of leaders to maintain continuity;
that the more widely the masses are spontaneously drawn into the struggle and form the basis of the movement and participate in it, the more necessary is it to have such an organisation, and the more stable must it be (for it is much easier for demagogues to sidetrack the more backward sections of the masses);
that the organisation must consist chiefly of persons engaged in revolutionary activities as a profession;
that in a country with an autocratic government, the more we restrict the membership of this organisation to persons who are engaged in revolutionary activities as a profession and who have been professionally trained in the art of combating the political police, the more difficult will it be to catch the organisation, and the wider will be the circle of men and women of the working class or of other classes of society able to join the movement and perform active work in it....

The active and widespread participation of the masses will not suffer; on the contrary, it will benefit by the fact that a "dozen" experienced revolutionaries, no less professionally trained than the police, will centralise all the secret side of the work-prepare leaflets, work out approximate plans and appoint bodies of leaders for each urban district, for each factory district and to each educational institution, etc. (I know that exception will be taken to my "undemocratic" views, but I shall reply to this altogether unintelligent objection later on.) The centralisation of the more secret functions in an organisation of revolutionaries will not diminish, but rather increase the extent and the quality of the activity of a large number of other organisations intended for wide membership and which, therefore, can be as loose and as public as possible, for example, trade unions, workers' circles for self-education and the reading of illegal literature, and socialist and also democratic circles for all other sections of the population. etc, etc We must have as large a number as possible of such organisations having the widest possible variety of functions, but it is absurd and dangerous to confuse those with organisations of
revolutionaries, to erase the line of demarcation between them, to dim still more the masses already incredibly hazy appreciation of the fact that in order to "serve" the mass movement we must have people who will devote themselves exclusively to Social Democratic activities, and that such people must train themselves patiently and steadfastly to be professional revolutionaries.

Aye, this appreciation has become incredibly dim. The most grievous sin we have committed in regard to organisation is that by our primitiveness we have lowered the prestige of revolutionaries in Russia. A man who is weak and vacillating on theoretical questions, who has a narrow outlook who makes excuses for his own slackness on the ground that the masses are awakening spontaneously; who resembles a trade union secretary more than a people's tribune, who is unable to conceive of a broad and bold plan, who is incapable of inspiring even his opponents with respect for himself, and who is inexperienced and clumsy in his own professional art—the art of combating the political police—such a man is not a revolutionary but a wretched amateur!

Let no active worker take offense at these frank remarks, for as far as insufficient training is concerned, I apply them first and foremost to myself. I used to work in a circle that set itself great and all-embracing tasks; and every member of that circle suffered to the point of torture from the realisation that we were proving ourselves to be amateurs at a moment in history when we might have been able to say, paraphrasing a well-known epigram: "Give us an organisation of revolutionaries, and we shall overturn the whole of Russia!"

When Lenin tried to organize a Marxist revolutionary party in Russia he faced a dilemma. The ultimate goal of Marxist Communism was absolute freedom; but the only realistic vehicle for attaining that goal was a disciplined party. He was irritated by the dissent and controversy which raged in revolutionary circles. In this famous treatise he outlined his ideas on freedom in powerful words that to later generations read like a denunciation of freedom as it is normally understood. Implemented by Lenin himself after the 1917 revolution and exacerbated by Stalin, they transformed Marx's dream of a "dictatorship of the proletariat" (absolute rule by the people, depriving the old ruling class of its power) into its opposite, a dictatorship over the proletariat. In later decades, the rationale for repression outlined here was advanced again and again by dictatorial Communist governments as they argued that the small "vanguard" of the proletariat was capable of leading the masses for their own good, even in opposition to their express will.

"Freedom"—it's a great word, but under the flag of "freedom of industry" the most rapacious of wars were conducted. Under the banner of "freedom of labor" workers have been robbed. The very same internal hypocrisy is contained in the contemporary phrase "freedom to criticize." People who are truly convinced that they have advanced the frontier of science would not demand freedom for new ideas to coexist next to old, but to replace them... We are walking in a small, tight group along a steep and difficult path, firmly joining hands. We are surrounded by enemies, and must continue almost always under their fire. We have freely and consciously decided to unite to fight the enemy and not stumble into the neighboring marsh, where dwell those who from the beginning have reproached us
for separating into a special group and choosing the path of struggle, and not the path of compromise. And now some of us are beginning to cry: "Let's go into the marsh!" And when we start to shame them, they object: "What a backward people you are! And aren't you ashamed to deny us the freedom to call you to a better way? Oh yes, gentlemen, you are free not only to call us, but to go anywhere you like, even if it's into the marsh. We even consider the marsh to be the right place for you, and are ready to assist you as best we can to move you there. But just let go of our hands--don't clutch at us and soil the great word "freedom," because we too are "free" to go where we like--free to fight with the marsh and with those who turn to the marsh. . . .

We said that Social-Democratic consciousness could not exist among the workers. But it could be brought to them from without. The history of all countries testifies that workers left exclusively to their own strength can cultivate only a trade union consciousness--that is the belief in the need to unite into a union, struggle against the bosses, press the government to pass needed labor legislation, etc. The doctrine of Socialism grew out of philosophic, historical, and economic theories which were worked out by the educated representatives of the propertied class, the intelligentsia. The founders of modern scientific socialism, Marx and Engels belonged themselves to the bourgeois intelligentsia. Just as in Russia, the theoretical doctrine of Social-Democracy arose quite independently from spontaneous growth of a workers movement, but arose rather as a natural and inevitable result of the development of ideas among the revolutionary socialist intelligentsia. . . .

The lack of preparedness of the majority of revolutionaries, a completely natural phenomenon, could not provoke any particular dangers. Once the tasks were correctly organized, once there was the energy for the repeated attempts to execute these tasks, the temporary failures were only half of the problem. Revolutionary experience and organizational skill come with time only if there is a desire to cultivate the necessary qualities, and if there is a consciousness of one's shortcomings which in revolutionary activity is more than half-way towards their correction.

But what was only half of the problem became full-blown when this consciousness began to fade (although it was very alive in the previously mentioned groups), when there appeared people--and even Social-Democratic organs--that were ready to make shortcomings virtuous and even tried to theoretically substantiate their cringing and bowing before spontaneity. . . .

Since there can be no talk of an independent ideology developed by the working masses in the process of their movement, the only choice is: bourgeois or socialist ideology. There is no middle way (for mankind has not developed any "third" ideology), and generally speaking, in a society torn by class opposition there could never be a non-class or an above-class ideology. Therefore any belittlement of socialist ideology, any dismissal of it signifies the strengthening of bourgeois ideology. There is discussion of spontaneity. But spontaneous development of the workers movement leads to its subordination to the bourgeois ideology. . . .

I could continue my exemplary analysis of the statutes, but I think that what's been said is
enough. A small, tight, solid nucleus of the most dependable, experienced and hardened
workers having trustworthy representatives in the main regions and connected by all the
rules of secrecy with the organization of revolutionaries can quite capably, with the
widest support of the masses and without any formal organization, fulfill all functions of
a professional organization, in a manner desirable to a Social-Democratic movement.
Only in this way can we secure the consolidation and development of a Social-
Democratic trade-union movement, despite all the gendarmes.

It may be rejected that an organization that is so loose and not well formed, that it's
membership is in no way enrolled or registered can even be called an organization. It can
be. It's not the name I'm after. But this "memberless organization" will do everything
required and guarantee from the very outset the solid connection of our future trade
unions to Socialism. Who but an incorrigible utopian would want a broad organization of
workers with elections, reports, and universal suffrage under absolutism?

The moral from this is simple: if we begin with a solid foundation of strong organization
of revolutionaries, we can guarantee the stability of the movement as a whole and realize
the goals of Social-Democracy and of trade unions. If we, however, begin with a wide
workers' organization, supposedly the most accessible to the masses (but in fact is the
most accessible to the gendarmes, and makes revolutionaries most accessible to the
police) we shall not achieve one goal nor the other . . . .

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