

THE MILITANTS' BOOKSHELF

LENIN AND THE ISKRA PERIOD

Volume IV, The Collected Works of Lenin; The Iskra Period, Book 1. 336 Pages. International Publishers, New York.

Thirteen years after the Russian revolution and seven years after Lenin's death a serious beginning is made with the publication of his collected works in English at a price workers can afford. Such unparadigmatic tardiness has, of course, its own significance which need not be dealt with here. It is most important now to report that four volumes comprising six books have recently been published in the popular priced edition. American militants thus have access now to at least a good part of this long-buried treasure. For this we must be grateful. The first book of volume IV, devoted to the early Iskra period, can only be a source of deep satisfaction to one who has the opportunity to read it.

What the incomparable leader wrote in this book, which covers a part of the formative period of the Bolshevik Party (1900-1902), has the most vital import for the American Oppositionists who follow in his path and who stand, as Lenin and his co-workers stood then, before the task of assembling and training the nucleus of the future party of proletarian struggle and victory. No duty is more pressing than the conscientious study of these volumes; no task will be more quickly and abundantly compensated. The words of Lenin himself, in contradistinction to the interpretations of those who speak in his name, reveal the indissoluble unity of the ideas of the International Opposition with the ideas of Lenin and reinforce conviction in them.

"Our teaching", said Engels, "is no dogma but a manual of action." And no less can be said of the teaching of Lenin who understood the doctrines of Marx and Engels in this sense and so applied them. The study of his works therefore cannot be a mere exercise in historical research. His writings are to be conceived rather as textbooks on the strategy of the proletarian revolution. They dishonor and distort Lenin who reduce his teachings to a system of lifeless formulae. The thing is to grasp their living essence, and its application to our own time and place. In other words to study his writings not as pedants but as revolutionaries.

The Iskra "Declaration"

Iskra [The Spark], as most of our readers know, was the paper founded by Lenin in 1900. One of the most interesting documents in the volume under review is the "Declaration by the Editorial Board of Iskra" which appeared in its first issue and outlined the ideas and aims of the editors. Iskra made its first appearance at a time of rise in working class activity, when the spontaneous labor movement was running ahead of its conscious political organization. The ideas of "Economism"—that is, of limiting the political work of the Social Democrats—were being propagated by an influential group of leaders. The Social-Democratic movement of the time consisted of loosely connected circles, and was lacking in a uniform program and cohesive organization. Lenin dedicated the Iskra to the task of uniting the political movement and overcoming the opportunist doctrines of Economism.

The "Declaration" declared war on revisionism, on Economism and the "effort to push into the background the task of forming a revolutionary party to lead the struggle at the head of the whole people" Thus from the very beginning Lenin brought revolutionary theory into the foreground. "Narrow practicality", he wrote in the first draft of the Declaration, "detached from the theoretical conception of the movement as a whole may destroy the contact between Socialism and the revolutionary movement in Russia on the one hand, and the spontaneous labor movement on the other." These words have a direct and immediate import today, especially for those Communists immersed in trade union work who tend to "lose" themselves in details. The conception of the party, as the highest form of proletarian organization—its unifying and directing force—was always uppermost in Lenin's thought as it is unfolded on the pages of this book.

The American Communist movement, including all of its factions, represents far less a political force than did the Social Democratic movement of Russia during the early Iskra period. And in view of the disintegration into factions it cannot justly be said that it is more united. If the Social Democrats of Russia at the time constituted a disunited propaganda body, no more can be said for our present movement. How then does our party régime, with its re-

gimentation of thought and its barracks-discipline, compare with Lenin's appraisal of the situation and the tasks? In the Declaration Lenin poses the question of uniting the movement. Foster, if we are not mistaken, also stands for unity—only the methods are somewhat different.

Lenin proposed a free discussion in the columns of the two journals (Iskra and Zarya). "They must reflect", he wrote, "all shades of opinion, all local peculiarities, and all the various political methods." His plan was to unite the movement through a free ideological struggle in which polemics would not be suppressed but rather encouraged.

He wrote: "Open polemics, conducted in the sight and hearing of all Russian Social Democrats and class-conscious workers, are necessary and desirable in order to explain the profoundness of the differences that exist, in order that disputed questions may be discussed from all angles, to combat the extremes into which representatives of various views, various localities, or various branches of the revolutionary movement invariably fall. **Indeed, we regard one of the drawbacks of the present-day movement to be the absence of open polemics between avowedly differing views, an effort to conceal the differences that exist over extremely fundamental questions.**" (Our emphasis.) One has only to read these lines to comprehend the chasm which separates the real Lenin from the epigones.

And that is not to say that Lenin had in mind a discussion from which no conclusions would be drawn. His aim, was to draw clearly the lines of demarcation. The publication was not to be merely a "storehouse for various views. On the contrary, we shall conduct it along the lines of a strictly defined tendency. This tendency can be expressed by the word **Marxism.**" Unity, said the heretic of 1900, "cannot be brought about by simply giving orders." For that idea alone he would be expelled in 1931.

Lenin the Orthodox Marxist

Lenin was an orthodox Marxist. This fact leaps out from every page of his writings. They are profoundly wrong, therefore, who attempt to set Lenin up as a theoretician beside Marx, that is, in opposition to Marx. Lenin's own writings refute this idea. Bolshevism came into being, as he himself said in "Left Sickness," on the granite foundations of Marxist theory. A study of Lenin's works is therefore at the same time a study of Marxism. If Engels was the greatest popularizer of Marx's doctrines in a general sense, then Lenin was undoubtedly the greatest popularizer of the same doctrines in a special and particular sense. Lenin's method was primarily the method of polemic and of concrete application. Through Lenin the word of Marx was illustrated in the deed. It was Trotsky who once remarked that the best road to Marx was through Lenin. In this book, which from first to last is a demonstration of Marxist truth in the heat of polemical battles, one can see a remarkable confirmation of this thought.

This is shown with singular clarity in the pamphlet, "The Agrarian Question And The Critics of Marx," which makes up a full third of the first of the two books devoted to the Iskra period. Here some of the most difficult problems of Marxism are elucidated with an A. B. C. simplicity. Moreover the pamphlet demonstrates the painstaking and thorough research with which the destined leader of the Russian revolution had informed himself for this conflict with the "critics". Thereby he was not only able to rout the "law of diminishing returns" on theoretical grounds alone. This "law", brought forward by the "critics" in support of the "superiority" of small-scale farming, was also demolished in Lenin's pamphlet by a detailed analysis of statistics showing the actual trend of the development of agriculture in the opposite direction.

How significant this polemic was for the Russian revolution can be estimated, for example, by citing a couple of well-known historic facts. Lenin, who defended Marxism on the agrarian question, stood, in the decisive hour, at the head of the victorious proletariat; Chernov, against whom the polemic was directed, didn't recognize the revolution when it arrived and found himself on the other side of the barricade with his Social Revolutionary party. It is no secret that American revolutionaries have yet to undertake a serious study and application of Marxism on the agrarian question. That necessary study can very well begin with Lenin's pamphlet referred to here.

Lenin was an all-sided leader, unique

in all history. Nothing escaped him or was beyond his attention. The party he created, for which history has no comparable example, bears testimony to the work of a genius in whom theory and practice, in all their ramifications, were united. Take the single question of the rôle of leaders, and the collective work of the group of leaders—which he truly described as an art, and an art, we may say parenthetically, which is all too little known—and see with what attentiveness he studied the problem, and solved it in advance. Lenin, the theorist and practical leader in one, knew—what pedants and formalists will never—that such a question as the personal relations between leaders can often play an enormous, even if not a finally decisive rôle. Did he not speak in the last testament to the Party of the rudeness of Stalin and "the relations between Stalin and Trotsky" as constituting "a big half of the danger of that split" he wanted to prevent? In direct connection with this danger of split he made his proposal to remove Stalin from the post of Party Secretary. And in this book there is a very illuminating article which bears the title, "How The Spark Was Nearly Extinguished" Therein he shows how the newspaper enterprise with its great political aims was once on the point of disruption because of the arbitrary conduct of Plekhanov and "the spoiled personal relations" which ensued from it. Leaders who master the art of working together greatly enhance thereby their usefulness to the revolution.

Not the least of the qualities of Lenin's matchless genius was his unfailing ability to combine realism with far-sighted vision. He knew what he wanted and how to get it. And he also knew the next step. That is a remarkable combination, and a rare one. Trotsky, in his Autobiography, speaks of the Menshevik Martov who, in revolutionary situations had thoughts for all questions "except the all-important question: What to do next?" And of Lenin he remarked that in all his preoccupations with matters great and small the goal was never absent from his thought. But together with that, as has been said, he concentrated on the task of the moment. He used the expression about grasping "the next link in the chain" so often that it has become a truism for the movement; repeated often enough, unfortunately, by people who could not grasp it as surely as Lenin did. If one could sum up the impression received from this first book of writings during the Iskra period in a word it would be to say: Lenin gives here a series of object lessons in the art of keeping sight of the goal and knowing what to do next in the struggle toward the goal.

"Where To Begin"

This is the essential quality of the notable article reprinted from the fourth number of Iskra which appeared in May, 1901, and called, "Where To Begin" There he outlined a system and plan of practical activity which would be consonant with the permanent interests of the movement and lead in the direction of its final aims. This article stirred up a great commotion throughout the ranks of the Russian Social-Democrats and—in an extended form—became the basis upon which the future nucleus of the Bolshevik faction was concentrated. The scattered and disunited character of the movement, the kind of an organization needed, and the first steps toward its creation—these were the questions he put and answered in "Where To Begin".

First of all he called for the formation of a fighting political organization. "Work for the establishment of a fighting organization [he said] must be carried on under all circumstances, no matter how 'drab and peaceful' the times may be, and no matter how low the 'depression of revolutionary spirit' has sunk. More than that, it is precisely in such conditions and in such periods that this work is particularly required: for it would be too late to start building such an organization in the midst of uprisings and outbreaks. The organization must be ready when the moment arrives." These words were true for Czarist Russia thirty years ago, and they are no less true for America today. Even now it is necessary to prepare for the future day.

The organization he projected was to be a political organization; in other words a party. Lenin was an irreconcilable foe of all eclecticism, narrow-mindedness and localism. The movement had to be united on a national scale; it had to invest all its detailed activities with a sweeping perspective of revolutionary overthrow. He wrote: "Our movement, intellectually as well as practically (organizationally), suffers most of all from being scattered, from

the fact that the vast majority of Social-Democrats are almost entirely immersed in local work, which narrows their point-of-view, limits their activities and affects their conspiratorial skill and training. It is to this fact of being scattered that we must ascribe the vacillation and the hesitation to which I have referred above".

The Rôle of a Newspaper

And the first task upon which he demanded the concentration of the movement, in preparation for its unification on a principled basis into a political organization which, in turn, would organize the revolutionary victory of the proletariat, was the establishment of a newspaper. "The first step toward removing this defect" said the article, "and transforming several local movements into a united national (All-Russian) movement is the establishment of a national All-Russian newspaper. Finally, it is a political paper we need. Without a political organ, a political movement deserving that name is impossible in modern Europe. . . ."

"But the rôle of a paper is not confined to the spreading of ideas, to political education and to procuring political allies. A paper is not merely a collective propagandist and collective agitator, it is also a collective organizer."

The article "Where To Begin" was a brief synopsis of the views he was to elaborate a few months later in his famous pamphlet "What is to be done?". In this pamphlet, which became a cornerstone of Bolshevism, Lenin settled accounts with the Economists and, with the revisers and "critics" of Marx. He elucidated the limitations of trade unionism with a profound insight which the whole history of international syndicalism has completely vindicated. He outlined the rôle of the Party—extended and concretizing Marx's theory of the vanguard—and brought forward for the first time the project of a body of professional revolutionaries who would devote their lives wholly to the revolution and take upon themselves the leadership and direction of the entire movement. "What Is To Be Done" is part of the contents of the second book of the volume devoted to the Iskra period and as such will be the subject of review another time.

—J. P. C.

THE REPRESSION IN SPAIN

PARIS.—

The repression of Admiral Aznar yields in no respect to that of Berenguer. It is directed against the worker militants. The monarchy wants to stifle in advance the voice of the proletarian revolution, while it plays the politician with the bourgeois republicans to whom it offers ministerial portfolios in its golden cage.

The Spanish Communist Party hardly exists. At the present moment, it has neither unity, nor cadres, nor clear perspectives. The first task of the Communists in Spain is to invest their party with organization and a political platform. This work has hardly been begun. Let us add that it cannot be conducted properly except through the tenacious efforts of the Opposition.

In the meanwhile, the militants are being constantly flung into prison. The approach of a period of electoral agitation now an dthen causes some doors to open while others are being closed. Our comrade Andres Nin, who had been arrested during the December events, has now been released. The same is true of our comrade Jose Soriano. Esteban Bilbao and Justo Solozabal have also been let go.

But our comrade Lacroix remains imprisoned in Valencia, where he has been for more than eight months. Comrade Garcia Lavid, condemned to five years imprisonment, remains at Oeana. His brother, Luis Garcia Lavid, has also just been arrested at Bilbao. In the same city, our comrade Leonato Miguel has been arrested too.

All these Opposition Communists are in the front ranks in the revolutionary struggle. They are setting the example in political firmness and proletarian courage. We shall return to the general political situation in Spain in a coming number.

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