

Lenin & the Bolshevik Party

A Reply to Tony Cliff

Bruce Landau

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A Reply to Tony Cliff & the International Socialists

By Bruce Landau

There is no more pressing task for revolutionary Marxists today than the construction of a party capable of leading the proletariat's struggle against world capitalism. But as the record of the past decades has shown, building such a party requires more than good intentions. It requires a scientific understanding of the relationship between the proletariat and its class-conscious vanguard. No one understood that relationship better than Vladimir Ilyich Lenin; he proved that by building the strongest, most flexible, and most successful workers' party in history — the Bolshevik Party.

Tony Cliff, the chief spokesman for the International Socialists (IS) of Great Britain, has now written the first volume of a projected three-volume political biography of Lenin. This volume deals with the period ending in 1914, and its title (*Building the Party*) indicates Cliff's main focus: How did the Russian Marxists manage to construct the Bolshevik Party, the only party which proved able to lead the working class in the conquest of state power and then to consolidate and defend that achievement in the face of the ferocious resistance of world imperialism? What were Lenin's fundamental guiding party-building principles, and how did he apply them at different times and at different stages in the development of the class struggle?

Writing in the magazine *International Socialism*, Cliff's associate Duncan Hallas has praised Cliff's new book in the most glowing terms:

This book is the most important work on the theory and practice of building a socialist organisation that has appeared for a long time. As a biography it has its faults. It would

This article is reprinted, in slightly abridged form, from *Revolutionary Marxist Papers*, No. 8, published by the Revolutionary Marxist Committee in Detroit, Michigan, USA, in 1976. The RMC was a group of about 35 people, most of them former members of the International Socialists, the American cothinkers of the British International Socialists (now the Socialist Workers Party) led by Tony Cliff. In August 1977 the RMC fused with the orthodox Trotskyists of the US Socialist Workers Party.

be no great exaggeration to say that it might well have been called *Building the Party — Illustrated from the Life of Lenin*. No matter. A manual for revolutionaries — and that is what we have here — is needed more urgently than a fully rounded biography. This is a work whose lessons can and must be applied to the practical tasks of party building.¹

Hallas is right in one regard. A “manual for revolutionaries”, a history of the Bolshevik Party which actually laid bare the method of that party’s construction, would be of incalculable value to revolutionaries today. There are few subjects which are so important, which get so much lip-service, but which receive so little serious study as this one. Such a manual would certainly contain precious lessons.

Cliff’s book, however, is not at all the book we need. It is a complete failure. Its failure is most glaring precisely where it claims to be a success, in its treatment of the revolutionary party in general and the Bolshevik Party in particular. This is, of course, unfortunate. But it is not at all surprising. The author is politically hostile to his subject. This is apparent not only in this latest book of his, but even more so in his earlier writings on the subject of Lenin, Leninism, and the revolutionary party’s nature and role. What distinguishes Cliff’s *Lenin* from his earlier works is this, that where the earlier works were candidly hostile to Leninism, the new volume pretends to be a partisan defence of Leninism against its critics. The change in pose conceals a fundamental continuity in Cliff’s political viewpoint.

From Cliff’s angle, there is good reason to package his old views in a new wrapper. Another candid, straightforward attack on Lenin would find only a limited readership among Marxist revolutionaries today. An attack dressed up as a celebration — a “manual” in Leninism, no less — stands an excellent chance of getting a very wide circulation indeed. It is this which makes Cliff’s new book so dangerous, and it is this which makes it so important to remove the book’s protective camouflage.

We will begin by examining Cliff’s earlier writings on Leninism and the Bolshevik Party, writings in which the point of view is the most clearly presented. We will then proceed to demonstrate, point by point, how the candid anti-Leninism of the early Cliff is smuggled into *Lenin: Building the Party* in the guise of militant Leninism.

Cliff’s earlier hostility to Leninism

One of Cliff’s earlier discussions of the nature of the class struggle and the role of the revolutionary party in conducting it appears in his pamphlet *Rosa Luxemburg* (first edition, 1959; second edition, 1968).

Rosa Luxemburg was an outstanding revolutionary leader. She was the single figure most responsible for leading a protracted struggle against the alliance of centrists

and reformists which dominated German Social-Democracy at the beginning of this century. She was the principal founder of the German Communist Party. She was an important economic theoretician. She died a martyr, and in death, she occupies a richly deserved place of honour in the Marxist tradition. But none of this alters the fact that her views on the relationship between the proletariat and its party were confused, semi-spontaneist, erroneous on balance. Her errors here represented her most notorious political failing.

Cliff does not agree with this appraisal. His pamphlet merely alludes gently to “Rosa Luxemburg’s possible underestimation of the role of organisation and possible overestimation of the role of spontaneity ...”² And Cliff is anxious to soften even this mild reference by adding:

While pointing out some of the deficiencies in Rosa Luxemburg’s position regarding the link between spontaneity and leadership in the revolution, one should be wary of concluding that her critics in the revolutionary movement, *above all, Lenin*, were at every point nearer a correct balanced, Marxist analysis than she was.³

We must be wary of Lenin above all, explains Cliff, because Lenin formulated a theory of the party in 1903-4 which championed “the separation of the conscious minority from unconscious majority, the separation of mental and manual labour, the existence of manager and foreman on the one hand, and a mass of obedient labourers on the other ...”⁴

That theory, Cliff insists, “may be grafted onto ‘socialism’ only by killing the very essence of socialism, which is the collective control of the workers over their destiny”.⁵ Naturally, Cliff generously concedes, Lenin’s pernicious socialism-killing theories did not fall out of the clear blue sky. They were a reflection, you see, of the terrible conditions in Russia in those days, conditions which necessarily nourished theories which underestimated the proletariat and overestimated the role of leadership:

Lenin’s views on organisation, his bending of the stick too far over to centralism, must be considered against the background of conditions in Russia.

In backward tsarist Russia, where the working class was a small minority, the idea that the working class alone can liberate itself could very easily be passed over.⁶

On the basis of the argument quoted above, the first edition of *Rosa Luxemburg* rendered its summary judgment in a manner quite in keeping with the author’s central thesis: For Marxists in the advanced industrial countries, Lenin’s original position can much less serve as a guide than Rosa Luxemburg’s.⁷

By 1968 and the issuing of the pamphlet’s second edition, Cliff had prudently decided to simply delete the last sentence quoted (without, however, either acknowledging or explaining that deletion). But the removal of the single sentence

failed to alter the overall thrust of his argument, which still concludes with the same summary judgment — even if it is now presented less forthrightly:

Where Rosa Luxemburg’s position regarding the relationship between spontaneity and organisation was a reflection of the immediate needs facing revolutionaries in a Labour [sic] movement controlled by a conservative bureaucracy [that is, in conditions like those “in the advanced industrial countries of today”! — BL], Lenin’s original position that of 1902-4 — was a reflection of the amorphousness of a vital, fighting revolutionary movement at the first stage of its development under a backward, semi-feudal and autocratic regime.⁸

In 1960, Cliff discovered a second ally with whom to jointly attack Lenin’s views on party and class. This time it was to be Leon Trotsky. *Not* the Leon Trotsky who joined the Bolshevik Party in 1917 and masterminded the October insurrection. And not the Leon Trotsky who led the fight for Leninism against Stalin’s subsequent state-capitalist counter-revolution. No, Cliff’s ally was the Leon Trotsky of 1903-4, at and immediately following the Second Congress of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) of 1903. That is, Trotsky while he was aligned with the Mensheviks. Cliff recorded in an article in *International Socialism* (“Trotsky on Substitutionism”) that:

Quite early in his political activity, when only 24 years old, Trotsky prophesied that Lenin’s conception of party organisation must lead to a situation in which the party would “*substitute* itself for the working class”, act as proxy in their name and on their behalf, regardless of what the workers thought or wanted.

Lenin’s conception would lead to a state of affairs in which “The organisation of the party substitutes itself for the party as a whole; then the Central Committee substitutes itself for the organisation; and finally, the ‘dictator’ substitutes himself for the Central Committee ...”⁹

Cliff accurately adds that, “To Lenin’s type of centralised party made up of professional revolutionaries, Trotsky counterposed a ‘broadly based party’ on the model of the *Western European Social-Democratic Parties*.”¹⁰

Trotsky’s later attitude to the remarks quoted by Cliff is well known. In the course of transforming himself into a Bolshevik, a Bolshevik leader, Trotsky completely repudiated the letter and the spirit of his own early attacks on Leninism. In his autobiography, for example, Trotsky acknowledged that “there is no doubt that at the time I did not fully realise what an intense and imperious centralism the revolutionary party would need to lead millions of people in a war against the old order”. Moreover, he added, his dire predictions made at that time concerning the outcome of Lenin’s party proposals were incorrect because “at the time of the London Congress of 1903, revolution was still largely a theoretical abstraction to me. Independently I could not

see Lenin's centralism as the logical conclusion of a clear revolutionary concept".¹¹

Unfortunately, Cliff's article of 1960 did not quote Trotsky's later self-criticism. Perhaps this is because it was precisely the immature, Menshevik views which Trotsky expressed in 1903-4 which Cliff found most appealing. For Cliff holds that:

In Trotsky's words about the danger of "substitutionism" inherent in Lenin's conception of party organisation, and his plea against uniformity, one can see his prophetic genius, his capacity to look ahead, to bring into a unified system every facet of life.¹²

Trotsky, thus, considered that his early attacks on Lenin reflected an overly abstract way of thinking, a *blindness* to the bonds between revolutionary program and revolutionary organisation. For Cliff, on the contrary, Trotsky's youthful Menshevism represented just the opposite qualities — historical *foresight* ("prophetic genius") and a unique understanding of the concrete ("unified systems").

Neither Tony Cliff's *Rosa Luxemburg* nor his "Trotsky on Substitutionism" were early mistakes subsequently outgrown and repudiated. *Rosa Luxemburg* (as already noted) was reissued by Cliff in 1968, and its elevation of Luxemburg's views on party and class consciousness over Lenin's was repeated afresh in Cliff's "Introduction" to the 1972 edition of Paul Fröhlich's study of Luxemburg. "Trotsky on Substitutionism" was reprinted in the IS pamphlet entitled *Party and Class*, also in the early 1970s.

This, then, is the author of our new "manual for revolutionaries" who has drawn from the history of the Bolshevik Party "lessons [which] can and must be applied to the practical tasks of party building" in our time. He seizes on the starkest weakness of Rosa Luxemburg and the crippling mistake of the young Trotsky in order to counterpose them to Lenin's single greatest contribution — his understanding of the necessity, role and nature of the vanguard party and his practical struggle to build it. Better acquainted with this author, the reader may now better understand his latest volume on this subject.

The nature of Economism

Lenin: Building the Party deals with an extended period in the history of the Bolshevik Party, a period beginning during the party's prehistory in the 1880s and ending in 1914 at the outbreak of World War I. It is impossible in a single article to expose all the errors of fact and interpretation which fill Cliff's history of this lengthy period. We will therefore focus on Bolshevism's formative years, 1895 to 1905, from the strike wave which gave the Russian Social-Democrats their first mass base until the year of the first Russian revolution. We will concentrate especially on the years 1900-1903, during which Lenin published the paper *Iskra*. For the purpose of studying the central principles of Bolshevism, this narrowing of the focus is permissible because (as Trotsky later

noted):

It was precisely during this short time that Lenin became the Lenin he was to remain. This does not mean that he did not develop further. On the contrary. He grew in stature — and at what a rate! — until October and after; but this was really organic growth. The leap from illegality to the seizure of power on October 25, 1917, was enormous; but this was, so to say, outward, the shooting upward of a man who had already weighed and measured all it was possible to weigh and measure, while in the growth which occurred before the split at the Second Congress of the party there was the imperceptible, and all the more fundamental inward development.¹³

This formative period is also the period in which Cliff's account wrecks the greatest havoc with the facts.

Cliff's first major distortion of history occurs in his discussion of the "Economist" tendency in Russian Social-Democracy. What was "Economism"? What was its mainspring, its significance? What did it represent? It is impossible to underestimate the importance of these questions. Their answers determined much of Lenin's ideas about party and class, not only in 1900-03 but for the rest of his life.

How does Cliff characterise the Economist tendency? He does not waste too many words on it. He begins by briefly criticising the pamphlet written by Kremer and Martov, *Ob Agitatsii* (On Agitation), which subsequently became an important source of inspiration for Economism. Says Cliff:

Ob Agitatsii had a mechanical theory of the relation between the industrial struggle, the struggle against the employers, and the political struggle against tsarism, based on the concept of "stages". In later years this became the theoretical foundation for the development of "economism", so harshly condemned by Lenin.¹⁴

And a little more specifically:

This [*Ob Agitatsii*] formula opened the door to the theory of stages characteristic of the future "economists". Socialists should limit their agitation to purely economic issues, first to the industrial plant, then to inter-plant demands, and so on. Secondly, from the narrow economic agitation the workers would learn, through experience of the struggle itself, the need for politics, without the need for socialists to carry out agitation on the general political and social issues facing the Russian people as a whole.¹⁵

Cliff then goes on to forge his link between this pamphlet and the Economist trend as a whole. He quotes liberal historian Richard Pipes, who characterises Economism as that trend "which subordinated politics as a matter of principle", and Cliff affirms that here Pipes has "put the 'economists' in correct perspective".¹⁶

This is Cliff's interpretation. To bolster it he could have cited not only Richard Pipes but also the critique of Economism formulated by Mensheviks like Theodore

Dan. Dan, too, agreed that Economism's original sin was its supposedly rigid fixation on economic — to the exclusion of political — issues and demands.¹⁷

But this critique is an extremely superficial one and therefore wrong. Pipes is wrong, Dan is wrong, and Cliff is wrong. All three of them are transfixed by Economism's form, by its temporary appearance, and they therefore miss its essence entirely.

The essence of Economism was its fundamental, unwavering *opportunism*, its determination that the role of Marxists was to passively tail after the mass working-class movement at each stage of its development rather than to act as the class's vanguard. It refused to assume the responsibility to speak to the proletariat about its class tasks as a whole, to pound away at what the class in general did not yet know and refused to believe. The Economists preferred to bow before every prejudice currently harboured by the workers with whom they made contact.

The initial insistence by the Economists that socialists give exclusive attention only to economic, not yet political, demands was merely a *passing manifestation* of this opportunist method, reflecting the fact that the more backward workers were at that time not yet struggling against the government but were already very much aroused over issues and demands aimed at their own employers and immediate economic grievances.

Even Julius Martov's account of the rise of Economism showed more clearly than does Cliff's the relationship between Economism's defining opportunism and its temporary "stage theory" fad. Certainly, notes Martov, it is true that "what was proposed was agitation on the basis of everyday economic needs that led to a clash between proletariat and employer. There was not even a mention of any agitation on the basis of other social interests — on grounds of political, civil, ethnic oppression, or cultural demands". But Martov also puts his finger on the underlying method which gave rise to this approach (without, of course, repudiating that method himself):

Instinctively, we were following the line of least resistance, taking the average worker as he was at the time, limited as he was at the time, limited by his local and shop horizon and by what appeared to be the impassable abyss that separated him from the social life of other classes.¹⁸

The Economists took the average worker as he was when they found him, and they politically adapted to him. That it was the opportunism which was characteristic, permanent, and "principled" while the elevation of economics over politics was merely secondary and fleeting — this was made clear by history itself. The strike movement to which the Economists were adapting overcame its disinterest in politics by 1901 (without the help of the Economists), producing bloody clashes with police and troops.¹⁹ Once this change was registered and acknowledged by the Economists, they were quick to

abandon their rigid stage theory, their alleged subordination of politics “as a matter of principle”. Their slogan now became — still tailing after events — “Lend the economic struggle a political character!”.

Did this mean that Economism as such was now dead? Not at all. The switch from tailing after spontaneous economic struggles to tailing after their resultant political struggles changed nothing fundamental about Economism. Least of all did the switch involve abandoning their defining opportunist nature, their “instinctive” gravitation toward “the line of least resistance”, their characteristic adaptation to “the average worker as he was at the time”. As early as 1900, Economist spokesman B. Krichevsky had explained in the opportunist journal *Rabocheye Dyelo* (Workers’ Cause) his attitude toward political slogans:

Political demands, which in their nature are common to all Russia, must correspond initially to the experience extracted from the economic struggle by a given stratum of workers. It is only on the grounds of this experience that it is possible and necessary to move on to political agitation.²⁰

Thus, by September 1901, Krichevsky could deem it completely appropriate to push for the political demands — without at all abandoning the Economists’ tailist method:

The change of tactics of *Rabocheye Dyelo* was a praiseworthy attempt to help orient the Social-Democrats to the new situation that had arisen. Basing ourselves on the general Marxist view that *revolutions happen and are not made*, we attempted to act as every revolutionary should act at a moment which forewarns the coming of revolution ...

The task of a revolutionary Social-Democrat is to hurry objective developments by his conscious work and not to depart from them or alter them through his subjective plans.²¹

“Lend the economic struggle a political character” was the slogan which signified the persistence of opportunism among the Economists even after the anti-politicism had disappeared. This slogan meant that the political slogans which Marxists must present and fight for must be limited to those already being presented by the masses on their own. In the political as in the economic struggles, the task of the Marxists was to tail passively after the movement, not to lead it, not to struggle to push it onto an explicitly Social-Democratic (i.e., class conscious, Marxist) basis. For this reason, the newly found “politicism” of the Economists expressed itself as abject capitulation to the political struggle of (on the one hand) individual terrorism and (on the other) bourgeois liberalism.²²

This was, in fact, the heart and soul of the critique of Economism which Lenin presented. He did not at all share Tony Cliff’s confusion. Even in the writings of Lenin which Cliff quotes, Lenin separates himself from Cliff’s superficial critique of

Economism. Thus Lenin wrote in “Our Immediate Task” in 1899 that:

It is the task of the Social-Democrats, by organising the workers, by conducting propaganda and agitation among them, to turn the spontaneous struggle against their oppressors into the struggle of the whole class, into the struggle of a definite political party for definite political and *socialist* ideals.²³

The same article goes on to hammer precisely this point home (although Cliff does not see fit to quote this further passage):

The task of Social-Democracy is to bring definite socialist ideals to the spontaneous working-class movement, to convert this movement with socialist convictions that should attain the level of contemporary science ...²⁴

This was Lenin’s recurrent theme in the attacks he waged on Economism in the pages of *Iskra* from 1900 to 1903. And he drew out the essence of his attack more clearly than ever in his 1902 pamphlet, *What is to be Done?* Lenin argued that the fundamental significance of Economism was that it provided “a *theoretical* basis for their *slavish cringing before spontaneity*. It is time to draw conclusions from this trend, the content of which is incorrectly and too narrowly characterised as ‘Economism’”.²⁵

In presenting his own revised version of Lenin’s critique of Economism, Cliff entitles that section of his book “The Need to Generalise the Struggle”.²⁶ But as the following passages from Lenin make clear, Lenin had only scorn for those whose solutions to the labour movement’s parochialism consisted merely in spreading, in “generalising”, it. That was the solution offered by the Economists themselves! Lenin, in contrast, insisted on the need to change the programmatic basis of that struggle, to give it a Social-Democratic basis:

[T]he first issue of *Rabochaya Mysl* shows that the term “Economism” (which, of course, we do not propose to abandon, since, in one way or another, this designation has already established itself) does not adequately convey the real character of the new trend. *Rabochaya Mysl* does not altogether repudiate the political struggle; the rules for a workers’ mutual benefit fund published in its first issue contain a reference to combating the government. *Rabochaya Mysl* believes, however, that “politics have always obediently followed economics” (*Rabocheye Dyelo* varies this thesis when it asserts in its program that “in Russia more than in any other country, the economic struggle is *inseparable* from the political struggle”). *If by politics is meant Social-Democratic politics*, then the theses of *Rabochaya Mysl* and *Rabocheye Dyelo* are utterly incorrect. The economic struggle of the workers is very often connected (although not inseparably) with bourgeois politics, clerical politics, etc., as we have seen. *Rabocheye Dyelo*’s theses are correct, if by politics is meant trade-union politics, viz., the common striving to secure from the government measures for alleviating the distress to which their conditions

give rise, but which do not abolish that condition, i.e., which do not remove the subjection of labour to capital. That striving indeed is common to the English trade-unionists, who are hostile to socialism, to the Catholic workers, to the “Zubatov” workers [workers organised into fake “unions” by the tsarist police chief Zubatov — BL], etc.

Thus, Lenin concludes (and he seems to be arguing directly with his latest biographer):

There is politics and politics. Thus, we see that *Rabochaya Mysl* does not so much deny the political struggle as it bows to its *spontaneity*, to its unconsciousness. While fully recognising the political struggle (better: the political desires and demands of the workers), which arises spontaneously from the working-class movement itself, it absolutely refuses *independently to work out* a specifically *Social-Democratic politics* corresponding to the general tasks of socialism and to present-day conditions in Russia.²⁷

The origins of Economism

In order to combat opportunist Economism, Lenin knew it was critical to first identify the reasons for its development and for its conquest of much (if not most) of the Russian Marxist movement in so short a period of time. Economism had to be torn up by the roots, so those roots had first to be uncovered.

Economism was produced by the manner in which the Russian Marxists immersed themselves in the mass strike movement which exploded among the Russian proletariat in the 1890s. Prior to that explosion, the Marxists had been without any mass base at all. They were still restricted to slowly extending their influence through the medium of small and mutually isolated study circles, each of which embraced only handfuls of the most advanced and highly motivated workers. When the strike wave broke out, the Marxists recognised the importance of involving themselves in it in order to transcend the narrow framework of the study circles and to influence larger numbers of workers. Lenin, for one, considered the members of the study circles quite prepared for this turn to mass, “practical” work. Confident of the theoretical stability of his cadres, therefore, Lenin was all the more eager (as he wrote in 1897) to turn those cadres toward “*agitation* among the workers, which naturally comes to the forefront in the present political conditions of Russia and at the present level of development of the masses of workers”.²⁸

In the course of this agitational turn, however, it soon became clear that Lenin’s 1897 assessment of the Marxist cadres had been too optimistic. The Marxists began to adapt to the mass movement, to bow before its errors, to retreat before its backward prejudices, and thereby became what Lenin called its “tail”. As a result, the turn which was intended to bring larger number of as-yet non-Marxist workers under the

leadership of the Marxists had the opposite effect: it subordinated the Marxists to the backwardness of the average workers.

The Marxist program was trimmed to suit the immediate illusions (not the immediate *needs*) of the average workers. Since these workers were not yet moving into political struggles on their own, the Marxists deleted references to political struggle from their propaganda and agitation. Because these workers had not yet in their vast majority consciously transcended the limits of bourgeois reformism, the Marxists sought to gain quick, widespread support by mimicking this backwardness themselves. Instead of illuminating the path which the movement would necessarily have to follow in order to meet the actual needs of the workers, they restricted their role to repeating whatever slogans and demands the mass movement had already raised independently — or which it was clearly prepared to accept immediately. Economism as a definite political tendency was nothing but the conscious expression of this opportunistic policy, the tendency which not only tolerated such opportunism but glorified it and elevated it into a full-fledged, “scientific” method, complete with its own pseudo-Marxist jargon. They were, as Martov later confessed, making a principle out of “following the line of least resistance” in obtaining mass support. That this could occur proved to Lenin that he had drastically over-estimated the theoretical clarity of the Russian Marxists themselves.

Cliff, too, purports to explain the rise of Economism. In this explanation, once again, he claims to give the reader the views of Lenin. In fact, Cliff’s explanation is extremely shallow and incomplete. It was only because Lenin’s analysis of Economism’s causes was incomparably deeper and richer than Cliff’s that Lenin was able to derive from the Economist experience not merely the need to publish *Iskra* but also many of the ideas which were to become the central pillars of Bolshevism as a whole for decades to come.

Cliff correctly notes that Lenin sought answers in the nature of the earlier Marxist study circles in Russia. But Cliff’s rendition of Lenin’s views on this subject is next to useless. According to Cliff, Lenin believed Economism developed simply because the study and propaganda circles in which the early movement was organized lacked strong organisational ties to one another and because their leaders were arrested by the police. Where Lenin placed these technical problems in firm political perspective, Cliff ignores such a perspective almost completely. He does this in order to draw a general conclusion about the effects of the “circle” period which is diametrically opposed to the one drawn by Lenin. According to Cliff, the circles laid the groundwork for their members’ later disorientation because the circles placed “an excess of emphasis on theory”. Because of this excessively theoretical emphasis, you see, circle members

were deprived of practical experience in the mass movement. All brain and no brawn, in other words, the socialists were foredoomed to failure.²⁹

The place where Lenin gave his fullest and most important presentation of the origins of Economism was an article written at the end of 1899, entitled “A Retrograde Trend in Russian Social-Democracy”. Cliff should have quoted at length from this article; instead he has completely ignored it. In that article Lenin argues, first, that the early circles bequeathed to its members a *misunderstanding* of Marxist theory. This was the result of a one-sided polemic which they had conducted against the terrorist wing of Populism and against the Russian liberals. Lenin wrote:

In their struggle against the narrow conceptions of the *Narodnaya Volya* adherents, who reduced politics to conspiracy-making, the Social-Democrats could be led to, and did at times, declare themselves against politics in general (in view of the then prevailing narrow conception of politics).³⁰

This theoretical error weakened the Marxists’ defences against opportunism. Second, the study circles were (as Cliff notes) isolated from one another. Moreover, they were all isolated from the socialist movement of the rest of the world. This aggravated their theoretical weaknesses, crippled their ability to prepare themselves to withstand the opportunist pressures which immersion in mass work necessarily involves. To put it another way, the Russian Marxists’ isolation from one another and from Marxists internationally held back the study circles’ ability to forge their members into real Marxist *cadres*. They were prevented from absorbing the lessons of the workers’ movement. (The political preparation for mass work provided by the circles was also restricted by the circles’ undue emphasis on the most abstract questions of philosophy, science, literature, etc., to the detriment of the theory of the class struggle and how to wage it.³¹)

It was, consequently, a group of Marxists only poorly cohered theoretically and organisationally which made the sharp turn to mass agitation in the 1890s. Lenin explains the results in terms which Cliff prefers to ignore completely but which were essential to Lenin’s analysis as well as to the manner in which he set out to combat Economism and afterward to build the Bolshevik Party. In “A Retrograde Trend” Lenin recalled of the circle-Marxists that in the mid-1890s:

From propaganda they began to go over to agitation — the spread of their agitation brought the Social-Democrats into contact with the lower, less developed strata of the proletariat; to attract these strata it was necessary for the agitator to be able to adapt himself to the lowest level of understanding, he was taught to put “the demands and interests of the given moment” in the foreground and to push back the broad ideals of socialism and the political struggle. The fragmentary, amateur nature of Social-

Democratic work, the extremely weak connections between the study circles in the different cities, between the Russian Social-Democrats and their comrades abroad who possessed a profounder knowledge and a richer revolutionary experience, as well as a wider political horizon, naturally led to a gross exaggeration of this (*absolutely essential*) aspect of Social-Democratic activity, which could bring some individuals to lose sight of the other aspects, especially since with every reverse the most developed workers and intellectuals were wrenched from the ranks of the struggling army, so that sound revolutionary traditions and continuity could not as yet be evolved. It is in this extreme exaggeration of one aspect of Social-Democratic work that we see the chief cause of the sad retreat from the ideals of Russian Social-Democracy.³²

It is *absolutely essential* that this insight of Lenin's be understood. The Russian Marxists — organisationally fragmented and theoretically weak — proved incapable of agitating among the mass of workers without politically adapting to them. The experience of the circles, the movement's geographical/organisational dispersal, etc., were important in that they contributed to this development. They contributed to the development of *tailism*.

This development was encouraged by another theoretical weakness of the Russian Social-Democratic agitators. They did not know the difference between different strata of the proletariat. They could not distinguish between the most politically advanced elements and the more backward and more numerous mass. In politically adapting to the more backward workers, they turned away from the advanced — from those workers who were in fact the most important to Russian Marxism and through whom the less advanced *could* be successfully reached.

In the article quoted above, Lenin emphasised the primary importance of reaching “the advanced workers that every working-class movement brings to the fore, those who can win the confidence of the labouring masses, who devote themselves entirely to the education and organisation of the proletariat, who accept socialism consciously, and who even elaborate independent socialist theories. Every viable working-class movement has brought to the fore such working-class leaders, its own Proudhons, Vaillants, Weitlings, and Bebels. And our Russian working-class movement promises not to lag behind the European movement in this respect”.

These workers who were ignored in favor of their more backward fellows were the workers upon whom the future of Russian Social-Democracy actually rested. Without them, it was impossible to reach the less advanced in a Marxist manner. Lenin continued:

At a time when educated society is losing interest in honest, illegal literature, an impassioned desire for knowledge and for socialism is growing among the workers, real heroes are coming to the fore from amongst the workers, who, despite their wretched

living conditions, despite the stultifying penal servitude of factory labour, possess so much character and will-power that they study, study, study, and turn themselves into conscious Social-Democrats — “the working-class intelligentsia.” This “working-class intelligentsia” already exists in Russia, and we must make every effort to ensure that its ranks are regularly reinforced, that its lofty mental requirements are met and that leaders of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party come from its ranks.³³

Lenin came back to this point in another article written soon afterward:

In no political or social movement, in no country has there ever been, or could there ever have been, any other relation between the mass of the given class or people and its numerically few educated representatives than the following: everywhere and at all times the leaders of a certain class have always been its advanced, most cultivated representatives. Nor can there be any other situation in the Russian working-class movement. The ignoring of the interests and requirements of this advanced section of the workers, and the desire to *descend* to the level of understanding of the lower strata (instead of constantly *raising* the level of the workers’ class-consciousness) must, therefore, necessarily have a profoundly harmful effect and prepare the ground for the infiltration of all sorts of non-socialist and non-revolutionary ideas into the workers’ midst.³⁴

This was the advanced stratum on which Social-Democratic activity had to focus. And this was precisely the stratum which the Economists were ignoring, Lenin insisted, when they announced “that the working-class *masses* are not yet able to understand the idea of the political struggle, an idea that is comprehensible only to certain, more developed workers”. Lenin’s answer threw into the boldest relief the relationship between leaping over the heads of the advanced workers in order directly to reach the backward (on the one hand) and the origins and method of Economist opportunism (on the other hand):

To this objection, which we hear so frequently — our answer is that, firstly, Social-Democracy has everywhere and always been, and *cannot but be* the representative of the class-conscious, and not of the non-class-conscious, workers and that there cannot be anything more dangerous and more criminal than the demagogic speculation on the underdevelopment of the workers. If the criterion of [our] activity were that which is immediately, directly, and to the greatest degree accessible to the broadest masses, we should have to preach anti-Semitism or to agitate, let us say, on the basis of an appeal to Father Johann of Kronstadt [a notorious pogrom-inciting priest — BL].³⁵

To mobilise the backward, Lenin explained, to move those who will not understand us completely, it is necessary to first reach the more advanced. Thus he wrote:

[T]he backward worker from the lower or middle strata of the masses will not be able to assimilate the *general* idea of economic struggle; it is an idea that can be absorbed by a

few educated workers whom the masses will follow, guided by their instincts and their direct, immediate interests. This is likewise true of the political sphere; of course, only the developed worker will comprehend the general idea of the political struggle, and the masses will follow him because they have a very good sense of their lack of political rights — and because their most immediate, everyday interests regularly bring them into contact with every kind of manifestation of political oppression.³⁶

The newspapers of the Economists (most prominently, *Rabochaya Mysl* and *Rabocheye Dyelo*) oriented to the backward workers and accordingly adapted to them, miseducating the genuinely advanced workers in their audience. A genuinely Marxist paper, said Lenin, had to orient to the working-class intelligentsia in order to transform it into socialist cadres:

The newspaper that wants to become the organ of all Russian Social-Democrats must, therefore, be at the level of the advanced workers; not only must it not lower its level artificially, but, on the contrary, it must raise it constantly, it must follow up all the tactical, political, and theoretical problems of world Social-Democracy. Only then will the demands of the working-class intelligentsia be met, and it itself will take the cause of the Russian workers and, *consequently*, the cause of the Russian revolution, into its own hands.

He continued:

The average worker will not understand some of the articles in a newspaper that aims to be the organ of the party, he will not be able to get a full grasp of an intricate theoretical or practical problem. This does not at all mean that the newspaper must lower itself to the level of the mass of its readers. The newspaper, on the contrary, must raise their level and help promote advanced workers from the middle stratum of workers.

One who passes up a *Marxist* orientation to the advanced workers in favor of tailing after the backward “will, aside from everything else, deprive himself of even an opportunity of successfully and steadily attracting the lower strata of the proletariat to the working-class cause”.³⁷

The nature of the *Iskra* project

Those initially determined to fight Economism found themselves in a small minority by 1897-98. The Economist majority included not merely those original agitators now wedded to their new trend. They also had won to their banner a considerable number of newly recruited workers. Despite the political inattention of the Economists to the *needs* of the advanced workers, the latter were nonetheless heavily influenced by Economist ideas and literature. Large numbers of them accepted the only form of Social-Democracy which had been presented to them — the bowdlerised form invented

by the Economists with the backward stratum of the proletariat in mind. Thus the advanced workers had been recruited to the movement which spoke, in fact, not with the outlook of the advanced workers but with that of the more backward.

Lenin's understanding of the problem determined the solution which he worked out. It was now necessary to rebuild the socialist movement in Russia on a new basis. That movement would have to be consolidated into a party, a party *capable* of successfully conducting the kind of mass agitation which had brought the *unprepared* movement of the 1890s to the brink of utter ruin. This party would have to be based firmly on Marxist theory, the Marxist theory of the class struggle, and on a political program which laid out with precision exactly what the proletariat had to do to achieve its ends. That Marxist education would have to be brought to bear on all the concrete questions of the class struggle, all questions of strategy and tactics. The new party would have to recognise explicitly that its task was to act as the vanguard, not the rearguard, of the mass movement; it had to shoulder the task of telling the masses what they did not yet know and not content itself with repeating the wisdom already acquired by the masses without the aid of the Social-Democrats.

The new party envisioned by Lenin would have to be unified and disciplined in its activity. This was the only way to prevent every local circle and party member from succumbing to the parochial pressures brought to bear on them: it was also the only way in which the proletariat could be given a single, crystal clear direction instead of a chorus of contradictory proclamations all coming from the same movement. Lenin's party would require strong ties to, and a clear understanding of, international Social-Democracy, its experiences and principles. This, too, was necessary to help keep the party from veering away from Marxism under the pressures of its immediate situation. Finally, the party which Lenin envisioned could be built only upon the most dedicated and politically advanced workers. Only such a party could give the mass working-class movement the kind of leadership which it so urgently required.

In every particular, the Leninist party described above reflected Lenin's remarkably clear understanding of Economism. His painstaking struggle to reveal the essential nature and origins of that trend was the necessary prerequisite for appreciating the kind of revolutionary organisation which had to be built for the future if mass work were ever to become a reality. All of this therefore is completely lost on Tony Cliff, who does not understand Economism at all.

But how was such a party to be achieved? This was not merely a technical problem. Lenin's party could not be produced by merely strengthening the ties between all the already-constituted circles who claimed adherence to the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party.³⁸ Under contemporary conditions that would produce not a Marxist

vanguard party but an Economist (that is to say, tailist, rearguardist, opportunist) party.

Nor could Lenin's party be built by *ignoring* the Economist leaders and their working-class following — by setting out to build a party based solely on “uncontaminated” workers. The Economists, Lenin understood very well, had managed to win political hegemony (even if only accidentally) over the most advanced workers, the worker-intelligentsia, the workers who wanted to make a revolution. To try to build a party without any of these workers would be to repeat the fundamental mistake of the 1890s all over again — leaping over the most advanced in search of the more backward. No, Lenin would have to build his party out of the human material presently misled by the Economist chieftains. The advanced workers would have to be won away from Economism through a long, difficult, patient, ideological struggle. This was the political content of Lenin's plan to build the RSDLP as a genuinely Marxist party.

Thus it was that Lenin (together with Plekhanov, Axelrod, Zasulich, Martov, and Potresov) set out to create an orthodox Marxist faction within the RSDLP milieu and to conduct an uncompromising factional war against the Economists. The paper *Iskra*, launched in 1900, was the organ of this new faction. *Iskra* declared its aim to be the transformation of the RSDLP from a fiction into an actual party, but a party of the type prescribed by Lenin and not by the currently dominant Economists.

In Cliff's account, all this is concealed and implicitly denied. *Iskra* is depicted merely as the organ of those who saw the need for building *some kind of* nation-wide socialist party; the ideological-polemical *factional* character of its party-building campaign is completely ignored. All that is left is an arduous campaign to achieve a politically neutral, purely technical accomplishment, the consolidation of all self-proclaimed Marxists in a single organisational framework.

There is only one way in which Cliff can eclipse the actual nature of *Iskra*, its organisation of supporters, and its factional perspectives — by once again ignoring the principle documents in which Lenin clearly discussed all these subjects. Most obvious of all is Cliff's refusal to confront, or even to acknowledge the existence of, the “Declaration of the Editorial Board of *Iskra*”, published in 1900. Once again, we will grant Lenin the privilege which Cliff denies him — to speak for himself. The “Declaration” openly takes note of the “ideological wavering” and *consequent* “disunity” plaguing the Russian Social-Democratic milieu. It sets for *Iskra* the task of fighting that wavering and disunity through “the formation of a strong party which must struggle under a single banner of revolutionary Social-Democracy”. Building the kind of party that was necessary was impossible under the sign of Economism, it continued. Building

the party therefore meant first of all changing the political basis, not merely the organisational form, of the present movement:

To establish and consolidate the party means to establish and consolidate unity among all Russian Social-Democrats, and, for the reasons indicated above, such unity cannot be decreed, it cannot be brought about by a decision, say, of a meeting of representatives; it must be worked for. *In the first place it is necessary to work for solid ideological unity* which should eliminate discordance and confusion that — let us be frank! — reign among Russian Social-Democrats at the present time.[Emphasis added — BL.]

A party, of course, needed more than simply ideological unity. It was also necessary to provide the united organisational apparatus, “especially for the purpose of establishing and maintaining contact among all the centres of the movement, of supplying complete and timely information about the movement, and of delivering our newspapers and periodicals regularly to all parts of Russia”.

But the *Iskra* group’s resources were slender and the work of ideological unification had to be prioritised:

We intend to devote ourselves to the first half of this task, i.e., to creating a common literature, consistent in principle and capable of ideologically uniting revolutionary Social-Democracy, since we regard this as the pressing demand of the movement today and a necessary preliminary measure towards the resumption of party activity.

Iskra’s editors called upon the Economist leaders to write for *Iskra*, to debate the subject of party-building, leadership, program, etc., before the eyes of the advanced workers, the worker-intelligentsia, in order to advance the clarification of differences necessary to build a firm party.

Before we can unite, and in order that we may unite, we must first of all draw firm and definite lines of demarcation. Otherwise, our unity will be purely fictitious, it will conceal the prevailing confusion and hinder its radical elimination. It is understandable, therefore, that we do not intend to make our publication a mere storehouse of various views. On the contrary, we shall conduct it in the spirit of a strictly defined, tendency ... But although we shall discuss all questions from our own definite point of view, we shall give space in our columns to polemics between comrades. Open polemics, conducted in full view of all Russian Social-Democrats and the class-conscious workers, are necessary and desirable in order to clarify the depth of existing differences, in order to afford discussion of disputed questions from all angles ...³⁹

Iskra’s focus during the next two years faithfully reflected this perspective. Issue after issue of that paper analysed the main questions facing Russian Marxists at a high level of sophistication, a level which was certainly above the understanding of all but the most advanced workers. This was a necessity which Lenin had pointed to in 1899. All

across the board, *Iskra* addressed and exposed the false positions of the Economists. The tasks of training the worker-intelligentsia as proletarian leaders and of winning them away from the Economists were thus inextricably intertwined. This was how *Iskra* aimed to lay the political foundations for a unified RSDLP.⁴⁰ By 1902, *Iskra* had won the factional struggle against the Economists. One after another workers' circle in Russia declared its support for Lenin's group. The convocation of the 1903 party congress by *Iskra* was intended to take formal note of the reconquest of the RSDLP for Marxism.

What Is To Be Done?

The lessons of Economism and the nature of *Iskra*'s fight against it were summarised most effectively in the pamphlet *What Is To Be Done?* (1902). Lenin repeatedly pointed this out: "*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."⁴¹ That Cliff chooses to polemicise explicitly and heatedly against Lenin only in his discussion of this pamphlet is important. Cliff's violent reaction to *What Is To Be Done?* shows clearly that his distortions of Economism and of the *Iskra* period were not accidents. It also highlights the essential political continuity which connects Cliff's earlier, open anti-Leninism with the less candid version concealed in his *Lenin: Building the Party*.

The central idea of *What Is To Be Done?* is simple. We have already summarised it above: The working class cannot achieve a clear understanding of the capitalist system, of its own position in that system, and of the steps which it must take to destroy that system and to usher in the communist future unless Marxists help it to do so. The experiences of the economic struggle against individual employers, taken by themselves, cannot relieve Marxists of this job. Without the conscious intervention of Marxists, the class struggle alone will only create a mass movement capable of waging the "trade-union struggle", the struggle (in Lenin's definition) "to secure (for the workers) ... measures for alleviating the distress to which their conditions give rise, but which do not abolish that condition, i.e., which do not remove the subjection of labour to capital". Trade-union consciousness Lenin identified as a form of bourgeois consciousness, since it accepts the general parameters of the bourgeoisie's class rule and takes issue with only one or another aspect of it. Lenin wrote:

But why, the reader will ask, does the spontaneous movement, the movement along the line of least resistance, lead to the domination of bourgeois ideology? For the simple reason that bourgeois ideology is far older in origin than socialist ideology, that it is more fully developed, and that it has at its disposal immeasurably more means of dissemination.⁴²

The Economists had argued as follows in defence of their policy of merely echoing the ideas formulated by the working class without their aid: the “spontaneous” class struggle itself will suffice to bring the proletariat to class-consciousness without the organised political struggle of the Marxists. *Iskra* and *What Is To Be Done?* had to declare war on this “slavish cringing before spontaneity”.

It is often said that the working class *spontaneously* gravitates towards socialism. That is perfectly true in the sense that socialist theory reveals the causes of the misery of the working class more profoundly and more correctly than any other theory, and for that reason the workers are able to assimilate it so easily, *provided*, however, this theory does not itself yield to spontaneity, *provided it* subordinates spontaneity to itself.⁴³

But Marxists have no reason for being Marxists unless their theory brings to the “spontaneous” movement something which is necessary for that movement and which will not appear by itself. That “something” was full class-consciousness: To rely on spontaneity in order to minimise the importance of Marxist leadership is criminal, since “the ‘spontaneous element’, in essence, represents nothing more or less than consciousness in an embryonic form”.⁴⁴ It was the yielding to spontaneity which had given rise to Economism in the first place, Lenin emphasised, with all the mournful results which that produced. Without the intervention of Marxists, the workers’ embryonic consciousness will be subjected to the influences of bourgeois society and bourgeois ideologues alone. Thus, “[A]ll worship of the spontaneity of the working-class movement, all belittling of the role of ‘the conscious element’, of the role of Social-Democracy, *means, quite independently of whether he who belittles that role desires it or not, a strengthening of the influence of bourgeois ideology upon the workers*”.⁴⁵

The Economists’ hosannas for spontaneity, Lenin repeated time and again, did nothing but conceal the fact that there is a constant, ongoing ideological battle being waged within the ranks of the working class. Depending on the outcome of that battle, the “spontaneous element”, the proletariat’s “consciousness in an [as yet] embryonic form”, would mature into either bourgeois (trade-unionist) or proletarian (revolutionary socialist, Marxist) consciousness. The worshippers of spontaneity are simply advocating that conscious Marxists withdraw from that ideological struggle and thereby surrender the battle to the bourgeoisie.

Since there can be no talk of an independent ideology formulated by the working masses themselves in the process of their movement. [Here Lenin introduces a footnote which we shall discuss below — BL] The *only* choice is — either bourgeois or socialist ideology. There is no middle course (for mankind has not yet created a “third” ideology, and, moreover, in a society torn by class antagonisms, there can never be a non-class or an above-class ideology). Hence, to belittle the socialist ideology *in any way, to turn*

*aside from it in the slightest degree, means to strengthen bourgeois ideology.*⁴⁶

This is the heart and soul of *What Is To Be Done?* There are only two points in this pamphlet which cannot be generalised and which do not form an essential element of Lenin's theory of the party. First is his emphasis on the temporary need for an undemocratic, top-down structure for the party, necessitated by the party's totally clandestine status and the consequent inability to introduce internal party democracy without leaving the party vulnerable to police repression. Lenin's strictures on this point were correct for their time and were also easily modified by Lenin himself later on when changed political conditions made that possible.

The second point is this. In distinguishing between vanguard and mass, Lenin at one point employed a formula borrowed from Karl Kautsky which incorrectly argued that the socialist vanguard necessarily originates outside the ranks of the working class as a whole. This formula in fact ran counter to the main theme of *What Is To Be Done?*, which correctly identified the vanguard with the proletariat's own most advanced elements fused with Marxist intellectuals from other classes. The bad formula employed was this one:

The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade-union consciousness ... i.e., the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers, and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labour legislation, etc. The theory of socialism, however, grew out of the philosophical, 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 intelligentsia.⁴⁷

Lenin himself subsequently abandoned this incorrect framing of the problem.⁴⁸ The Marxist vanguard is defined politically, not sociologically. It is true that Marxism was first formulated by bourgeois intellectuals. It is also true that young Marxist movements frequently obtain their first cadres largely from among such intellectuals. It is not true, however, that Marxism evolved as the result of simple intellectual evolution independent of, and uninfluenced by, the rise of the working-class movement. And it is not correct to pose Marxism as a doctrine which *only* intellectuals can arrive at on their own.

This erroneous formulation of Lenin's was unfortunate. But it is essential to recognise that the formula was central neither to Lenin's thinking in general nor to

What Is To Be Done? in particular. On the contrary, it is a foreign intrusion into them both. It was an isolated polemical exaggeration encouraged by Lenin's attempt to defend his own, altogether correct, understanding of the questions at issue with Economism by citing an "authoritative" reference from a still universally respected Marxist theoretician.

Lenin's own point was not that workers were alien to Marxism, that workers could not become Marxists without the "outside" aid of intellectuals. His real point was that Marxist consciousness will not arise among the mass of workers "spontaneously" — i.e., as a simple reflex of the struggle against the employers. Worker-Marxists will arise only as the result of the process Lenin had described three years earlier in "A Retrograde Trend in Russian Social-Democracy". The advanced workers would have to do more than merely mull over their own experiences in the class struggle. They would have to "study, study, study, and turn themselves into conscious Social-Democrats — 'the working-class intelligentsia'". In this process the workers would have to be assisted by those workers who had accomplished this goal even earlier and by Marxists drawn from the bourgeois intelligentsia as well. That *this* is the central axis of *What Is To Be Done?* will be obvious to any informed and sympathetic reader. Thus, for example, immediately after correctly declaring that "there can be no talk of an independent ideology formulated by the working masses themselves in the process of their movement", Lenin introduces the following characteristic note:

This does not mean, of course, that the workers have no part in creating such an ideology. They take part, however, not as workers, but as socialist theoreticians, as Proudhons and Weitlings; in other words, they take part only when they are able, and to the extent that they are able, more or less, to acquire the knowledge of their age and develop that knowledge. But in order that working men *may succeed in this more often*, every effort must be made to raise the level of the consciousness of the workers in general; it is necessary that the workers do not confine themselves to the artificially restricted limits of "literature for workers" but that they learn to an increasing degree to master *general literature*. It would be even truer to say "are not confined", instead of "do not confine themselves", because the workers themselves wish to read and do read all that is written for the intelligentsia, and only a few (bad) intellectuals believe it is enough "for workers" to be told a few things about factory conditions and to have repeated to them over and over again what has long been known.⁴⁹

This is the note which Lenin continues to sound in the rest of the pamphlet — the importance of assisting the Marxist education of the largest possible number of workers. This is the idea which informs the entire pamphlet, Lenin's concrete organisational recommendations, and the general theory of Leninism as a whole:

And we must see to it, not only that the masses “advance” concrete demands, but that the masses of the workers “advance” an increasing number of such professional revolutionaries.⁵⁰

And *we will succeed in doing this*, because the spontaneously awakening masses will *also produce* increasing numbers of “professional revolutionaries” *from their own ranks* (that is, if we do not take it into our heads to advise the workers to keep on marking time).⁵¹

Attention, therefore, must be devoted *principally to raising* the workers to the level of revolutionaries; it is not at all our task to *descend* to the level of the “working masses” as the Economists wish to do, or to the level of the “average worker” as *Svoboda* desires to do ...⁵²

And:

[T]he masses will never learn to conduct the political struggle until we help *to train* leaders for this struggle, both from among the enlightened workers and from among the intellectuals. Such leaders can acquire training *solely* by systematically evaluating *all* the everyday aspects of our political life, *all attempts* at protest and struggle on the part of the various classes and on varied grounds.⁵³

The driving thoughts of *What Is To Be Done?* were far richer and more fruitful than was the Kautskyan formula which Lenin tried to appropriate. To employ that formula at all Lenin had to empty it of Kautsky’s original meaning and fill it with his own distinctive content.*

Tony Cliff does not like the Kautskyan formula appropriated by Lenin and introduced into *What Is To Be Done?*, either. Had he explained, as we have above, the distinction between the Leninist essence and the Kautskyan form of the offending passages, we would have no quarrel with him. He would then have performed a service of some value. But Cliff does not perform this service, since to do so would run completely counter to his own purpose.

Cliff disagrees. He prefers to seize upon Lenin’s isolated misformulation and to *bracket* it together with the completely correct guiding ideas of *What Is To Be Done?* in order to denounce the latter along with the former as anti-Marxist. Cliff’s aim is to discredit *What Is To Be Done?* as a whole. In the process, Cliff returns to the argument he began in his *Rosa Luxemburg* and “Trotsky on Substitutionism”. Cliff quotes the Kautskyan formula discussed above and follows it immediately with four other passages from the pamphlet. These four passages are all above reproach. They simply explain

* For a critique of Landau’s view of Lenin’s “Kautskyan formula”, see the Appendix following this article. — *Ed.*

that real Marxist consciousness can be acquired only by studying capitalist society as a whole, that conscious Marxists must take an active part in the ideological war raging within the working class, and that their failure to do so can only ensure “the ideological enslavement of the workers by the bourgeoisie”.⁵⁴ Cliff then objects not merely to the Kautskyan formula but to all of the specifically Leninist ideas bracketed with it. He amalgamates them all into a single viewpoint and declares:

There is no doubt that this formulation overemphasised the difference between spontaneity and consciousness. For in fact the complete separation of spontaneity from consciousness is mechanical and non-dialectical. Lenin, as we shall see later, admitted this [i.e., in 1905 — BL]. Pure spontaneity does not exist in life — “every ‘spontaneous’ movement contains rudimentary elements of conscious leadership, of discipline” [wrote Gramsci — BL]. The smallest strike has at least a rudimentary leadership.⁵⁵

Isn't this incredible? Cliff is seriously arguing that Lenin was unaware that spontaneity and consciousness are interrelated! But it was precisely Lenin — and nowhere more clearly than in this pamphlet — who tore the mystical veil off the Economists' *cult* of spontaneity and thereby revealed this interrelationship. It was precisely because Lenin knew very well that spontaneity was nothing but “embryonic”, unfinished, still-immature consciousness that he denounced the Economists so mercilessly. He knew that unless Marxists intervened, the embryonic consciousness of the masses (spontaneity) would follow the “path of least resistance” and mature into not Marxist but a form of bourgeois consciousness. The observation of Gramsci's, offered in evidence against Lenin, is nothing but a paraphrase of Lenin himself. While Cliff attempts to use Gramsci's point to belittle Lenin's war against the spontaneity-cult, Gramsci himself correctly employed it to justify that same war.⁵⁶

Having now added poor Gramsci to his pantheon of heroes, Cliff quickly proceeds to cite yet another authority's views in order to refute *What is to be Done?* Who is this new champion? None other than V.I. Lenin! Says Cliff:

Lenin himself, in an article written at the end of 1899, entitled, “On Strikes”, sharply contradicted his later statements in *What Is To Be Done?* on the relation between the spontaneous class struggle and socialist consciousness.⁵⁷

And just what was it that Lenin wrote in 1899 which Cliff finds preferable to the thesis of *What Is To Be Done?* We faithfully reproduce in their entirety all the passages which Cliff sees fit to quote from “On Strikes”:

Every strike brings thoughts of socialism very forcibly to the workers' mind, thoughts of the struggle of the entire working class for emancipation from the oppression of capital.

And:

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.

Finally:

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.

And that is all. These are the ideas about “the relation between the spontaneous class struggle and socialist consciousness” which Cliff prefers to those in *What Is To Be Done?*

If this was all Lenin had really had to say on this subject in 1899, we would have to conclude that in that year Lenin was himself still in the grip of Economism. In that case, we would only ask why Cliff preferred the immature Lenin to the mature one. But in fact Lenin was *not* an Economist in 1899; Cliff has torn his quotations out of context once again. Had he deigned to quote a bit more, it would have become clear that in the quoted passages Lenin was only arguing that their struggles do indeed make workers *receptive* to socialist ideas. But he was not at all arguing that such struggles (like strikes) are *sufficient* to transform strikers into Marxists, into class-conscious workers. On the contrary: the same strikes which open the door for Marxists simultaneously give rise also to the most backward ideas among the workers:

When strikes are widespread among the workers, some of the workers (including some socialists) begin to believe that the working class can confine itself to strikes, strike funds, or strike associations alone; that by strikes alone the working class can achieve a considerable improvement in its conditions or even its emancipation ... It is a *mistaken idea*.⁵⁸

Indeed, says Lenin, the successful organisation even of strikes in Russia requires a level of class-consciousness far higher than mere strike consciousness. Lenin wrote:

[S]trikes can only be successful where workers are sufficiently class-conscious, where they are able to select an opportune moment for striking, where they know how to put forward their demands, *and where they have connections with socialists and are able to procure leaflets and pamphlets through them*.⁵⁹

The problem with our strikes, Lenin continues, is that:

There are still very few such [class-conscious] workers in Russia, and *every effort must be exerted* to increase their number in order to make the working-class cause known to the masses of workers and to acquaint them with socialism and the working-class struggle. This is *a task which the socialists and class-conscious workers must undertake*

jointly by organising a working-class *party* for this purpose.⁶⁰

And Lenin is still not finished. The workers' struggle must be aimed against the entire ruling class and its state. This *will not* occur "by itself", as a mere reflex of strike activity. On the contrary:

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.⁶¹

By deleting the specifically *Leninist* passages from "On Strikes", Cliff has produced (and attributed to Lenin) a theory "on the relation between the spontaneous class struggle and socialist consciousness" which is *spontaneist*, Economist, opportunist. Cliff is arguing, through a dishonest portrayal of "On Strikes", that strikes make workers class-conscious by *themselves*. Lenin's article "On Strikes" looks a bit different once *all* the key ideas contained in it are accurately reproduced.

Having foisted his own Economist views on the Lenin of 1899, Cliff proceeds to castigate *What is to be Done?* He does this by presenting a thoroughly philistine version of that pamphlet's general viewpoint and program. Says Cliff:

The logic of the mechanical juxtaposition of spontaneity and consciousness was the complete separation of the party from the *actual* elements of the working-class leadership that had already arisen in the struggle. It assumed that the party had answers to all the questions that spontaneous struggle might bring forward. *The blindness of the embattled many is the obverse of the omniscience of the few.*⁶²

Read that paragraph, and then read it again. Keep in mind that it is taken from an allegedly pro-Bolshevik biography of Lenin. Amazing, is it not?

In fact, Cliff has merely reproduced in this paragraph the standard, shop-worn slanders and diatribes hurled against *What Is To Be Done?* by all Lenin's critics from 1902 down to the present day. We have already demonstrated that Lenin above all repudiated "the mechanical juxtaposition of spontaneity and consciousness". That slander is by now transparent. Cliff's allegation that Lenin's logic required "the complete separation of the party from the *actual* elements of the working-class leadership that had already arisen in the struggle" is more elusive. Cliff may be trying to say one of two things here. He may be charging that Lenin (or Lenin's "logic") ignores on principle *all* leaders who arise from the ranks of the workers. If this is Cliff's point, he is distorting the record of the *Iskra* organisation as well as the spirit and letter of *What is to be Done?* We have already quoted Lenin's emphasis in that pamphlet precisely on reaching the advanced workers and training them as working-class Marxist leaders.

But Cliff probably means something else. He is very likely attacking Lenin for *denying* that every individual propelled into the leadership of the mass movement by

“the struggle” would automatically become a socialist and deserve a place in the socialist party. If this is Cliff’s point, he is not slandering Lenin here at all. Lenin certainly did believe that the mass movement would at various times raise up into its leadership elements which were completely hostile to socialism and which would remain so for the rest of their lives. And Lenin was dead set against bringing these elements into the RSDLP simply because they had managed to become mass leaders. Was Lenin wrong in this opinion of his? Hasn’t the entire history of the socialists in the labour movement been one of struggle against those leaders of the workers’ economic and political organisations who betray their followers because of their prior loyalty to capitalism’s interests? The police agent, Father G.A. Gapon, was an “*actual* element of working class leadership” thrust forward in 1905 by “the struggle”. Should Lenin have pulled Gapon into the RSDLP? And what about the man elected as the first president of the Petrograd Soviet in 1905 — Khrustalev-Nosar? Trotsky describes the man as “an accidental figure in the revolution, representing an intermediate stage between Gapon and the Social-Democracy”.⁶³ Still, he was undoubtedly an “actual” leader who “had already risen in the struggle”. Did he, too, belong among the Bolsheviks for that reason alone?

Of course not. The vanguard party cannot include every individual catapulted into the leadership of the proletariat at every stage of its own political development. How can it? The task of the party is to point out to the class what must be done, not simply to reflect what has already been accomplished. Consequently, its members are selected not mainly because of their success in winning mass acceptance as leaders but on the basis of their political views and commitment. Cliff’s attack on this Leninist conception of party membership is indicative of his general distaste for Bolshevism’s insistence on a politically defined and politically educated party membership.

We continue. What, now, is this nonsense about Lenin’s logic assuming “that the party had answers to *all* the questions that spontaneous struggle might bring forth”? Where does Lenin ever claim such total omniscience for the party or for the proletarian vanguard? What is it in *What Is To Be Done?* which “assumes” such omniscience, which requires it as an essential premise? This is simply demagoguery.

Is it really necessary to counterpose the party’s “omniscience” to the mass’s supposed imbecility in order to support Lenin and agree with his pamphlet, i.e., to assert that a party really composed of worker-Marxists is more likely to make correct decisions about the class’s tasks than are the non-party, non-Marxist, politically backward workers? Or does Cliff dispute this assertion, too? If you do not agree with this as a generalisation, what justification remains for building a Marxist party in the first place, much less for trying to win for such a party the leadership of its class? Indeed, if

Marxism does not arm us with more foresight and insight than we would have without it, what value is there in Marxism itself? This is not merely a rhetorical question. All doubts about the vanguard's *general* ability to see and understand things better than do the backward workers actually boil down to doubts about the practical value of the vanguard's world-view — Marxism.

Naturally, there are occasions in which the vanguard is wrong and the less advanced are right. This occurs most frequently over tactical questions, but it may also occur when the vanguard clings to ideas which may once have been valid but which are no longer timely. In such cases, the mass movement may in fact see further than its own vanguard — or at least act (if only instinctively, only half-consciously) in a manner more in tune with the objective situation. Nevertheless, if such circumstances are presented as the general case the very concept of the vanguard party loses its validity. This is the direction in which *Cliff's* “logic” pulls *him*.

The split in the *Iskra* forces

In 1903, the *Iskra* organisation (which by this time had won the support of most Social-Democrats active in Russia) convened the Second Congress of the RSDLP. The congress was intended by Lenin to crown the years-long struggle not merely to rebuild a party but a party which was all-Russian, centralised, and which stood firmly upon the orthodox Marxist platform of the *Iskra* faction and not on the platform of Economism-opportunism. Tragically, this goal was not attained. The 1903 congress did not produce a unified party standing on Leninist programmatic and organisational principles. Instead, it produced a newly fragmented party in which Lenin and his close associates found themselves a small and despised minority. Even worse, the Leninist minority found itself opposed by a majority led by the balance of the old *Iskra* editorial board — Plekhanov, Axelrod, Zasulich, Potresov and Martov, with very vocal support from Trotsky.

Why did this calamity occur? Was the split in the *Iskra* leadership really a bolt out of the blue, or did it have its origins (even if they were unclear at the time) in the earlier period? How was it possible for the *Iskra* leadership, whom everyone had previously regarded as virtually monolithic, to polarise so thoroughly and so quickly?

Cliff cannot provide the answers to such questions. All he can do is narrate some of the events at the congress, noting that when Lenin fought to make the RSDLP accept “the harsh necessity for democratic centralism”, *Iskra*-ists like Martov and Trotsky “balked at this”.⁶⁴ The question, though, is: *why* did they “balk”?

They did so because prior to 1903 they had never fully accepted either Lenin's interpretation of the nature and origins of Economism or Lenin's specific way of

fighting Economism. They had therefore never fully accepted Lenin's definition of the kind of party which had to be built. This lack of fundamental agreement among the members of the old editorial board was hidden from their own view because it was not put to the test and thereby exposed until the 1903 congress itself. At that point it burst into view precisely when Lenin attempted to translate the presumed *Iskra* consensus into definite organisational proposals.

The ideological roots of the 1903 split *remain* obscure in Cliff's account, despite the fact it is written more than seven decades later and with the benefit of hindsight, for a very simple reason: Cliff himself subscribes to the analysis of Economism and to the very same view of the socialist party which led Martov, Trotsky, et. al., to "balk" at adopting Lenin's proposals and leadership in 1903.

In 1903, the role of chief spokesman for the new anti-Leninist bloc fell to Martov. Retrospectively, we can see that his pre-congress differences with Lenin over the nature of Economism and the kind of party needed to resist opportunism (internally and in the class at large) prepared him for that role.

The first such difference with Lenin concerned Economism. In 1899, Lenin wrote his penetrating article "A Retrograde Trend in Russian Social-Democracy", in which he laid bare the roots of the Economist-opportunist backsliding within the Marxist ranks — the Marxists' political adaptation to the backward workers during the agitational turn of the 1890s. In that same year, however, Martov wrote an article defending the way in which the agitational turn had been made.⁶⁵ When Martov finally recognised the existence of a defined Economist trend he attacked it. But he did so like a Tony Cliff, not like a Lenin.

The error of the Economists, said Martov, lay not in a generalised opportunism. No, it was to be found in their too-rigid stage theory, their overemphasis on economic as opposed to political agitation. This one-sidedness was tolerable while the mass movement was itself concerned solely with economic issues, said Martov, but it was plainly outdated now that the masses themselves had taken up political demands.

Lenin's understanding that Economism was fundamentally opportunism, which in turn fed upon and adapted to the prejudices of more backward workers, led Lenin to emphasise the importance of fashioning a *vanguard* party, a party which *leads* the proletariat and which must therefore be restricted in composition to the most advanced workers. Martov's superficial appraisal of Economism barred his way to Lenin's conclusions. Consequently, when the Economists made the turn to "lending the economic struggle a political character", Martov considered *Iskra's* fight against Economism to be won. He therefore objected to Lenin's restricted conception of which workers belonged in the party; even before the 1903 congress, Martov argued

for an RSDLP based on the model of the West European “all-inclusive” parties.⁶⁶ The analysis of Economism adopted by Martov and others (and now blithely accepted by Cliff as well) was far too superficial to reveal the pitfalls involved in the all-inclusive party concept.

Trotsky entered the Second Congress as a firm supporter of Lenin. But he, too, “balked” at Lenin’s proposal for a narrowly defined vanguard party. In his article of 1959 (“Trotsky on Substitutionism”), Cliff accurately noted the reason for Trotsky’s 1903 split with Lenin: “... Trotsky counterposed a ‘broadly based party’ on the model of the Western European Social-Democratic parties”. The theoretical justification for building a socialist party on an all-inclusive basis rested on the same kind of historical fatalism counterposed by Cliff himself to *What Is To Be Done?* — the belief (in Cliff’s words) that “capitalism itself inculcates a socialist consciousness in the working class”; that *What Is To Be Done?*’s emphasis on organising the fight to spread such a consciousness represented a “mechanical overemphasis on organisation”.⁶⁷

Karl Kautsky expressed this same *really* naive, mechanical attitude toward the relation between the class and its party in *The Class Struggle*, the popular exposition of the German Social-Democratic Party’s Erfurt Program (1891):

Thus it appears that wherever an independent labour party is formed it must sooner or later exhibit socialist tendencies; if not socialist in the beginning, it must [inevitably] become so in the end.⁶⁸

And in repudiating it later on, Trotsky once again pointed to the theoretical roots of his early opposition to Lenin’s party-building methods:

I began with the radically wrong perspective that the course of the revolution and the pressure of the proletarian masses would ultimately force [the entire RSDLP — BL] to follow the same [revolutionary] road.⁶⁹

The rise of Economism had already proven to Lenin that such thinking was bankrupt and that a party whose structure and perspectives were based on such thinking was doomed repeatedly to succumb to opportunism. The failure of the other members of *Iskra*’s editorial board to draw these lessons from the Economist experience — that is, their failure to see any farther in 1903 than Tony Cliff is able to see even in 1975 — laid the basis for their hostility toward and split from Lenin at the Second Congress. Naturally, Cliff cannot see this.

Cliff’s attacks upon *What Is To Be Done?* lay bare his actual attitude toward the ideas for which Lenin still fought in 1903. Duncan Hallas, Cliff’s enthusiastic reviewer and co-thinker, makes that attitude more explicit. In the article in *International Socialism* already quoted (where Cliff’s *Lenin* is praised as a “handbook for revolutionaries”), Hallas congratulates Cliff for helping to expose various “misunderstandings” commonly

encountered “about the *What Is To Be Done?* type of organisation.” Hallas is particularly amused by the “comic misunderstanding” which “used to crop up every now and then in disputes about recruitment”. Just what was this comic misunderstanding? “It is that the reason Lenin favoured a restricted membership was to ensure ‘a high political level’ amongst that membership ...”. Furthermore, Hallas does not know which is funnier — the idea that Lenin favoured restricting party membership in order to guarantee “a high political level” or the further “misunderstanding” that Lenin did so in order “that everything could be most democratically decided and the leadership subject to more effective control by the membership”.⁷⁰

To believe that Lenin desired a high political level among party members, according to Hallas, is patently ridiculous. “A more absurd proposition would be difficult to imagine”, he says. “The tsarist police ensured that party members had a high level of *commitment*; the ‘high political level’ is a myth, if it is taken to mean — as it usually is — a knowledge of the Marxist texts and the history of the movement.”⁷¹ In Hallas, Cliff has found a reviewer closely in tune with the spirit and letter of Cliff’s biography of Lenin. Hallas’s scorn for this “absurd proposition” merely echoes Cliff’s contempt for Lenin’s emphasis on reaching, recruiting, and educating the “working-class intelligentsia” who “study, study, study, and turn themselves into conscious Social-Democrats”.

The first time that the division between future Bolsheviks and Mensheviks broke out openly at the Second Congress was over paragraph one of the proposed party rules. Lenin insisted that membership be limited exclusively to such individuals “who recognise the party’s program and support it by material means and by personal participation in one of the party’s organisations”. Martov disagreed; he wanted to cast the net of membership wider. Members should accept the party program but need only support that program “by regular personal association under the direction of one of the party organisations”. (Note that both formulas require acceptance, much less knowledge, of at least one “Marxist text” — i.e., the RSDLP program!)

In the ensuing debate, it quickly became clear that the dispute over how to formulate paragraph one in fact reflected deep-going differences over exactly who should and who should not be permitted into the party — i.e., who should be given the right to represent the party publicly and who should have the power to join in shaping the party’s policies.

Cliff’s book is almost 400 pages long. But when it comes time to discuss this seminal conflict over party membership, Cliff sees fit to devote no more than two pages to it. This brevity lends itself only to the distortion of Lenin’s views in that dispute. A bit less haste and more attention to detail is in order.

What was Martov's line of thinking? He was for greater "elasticity" in defining party membership, he said, because he held that:

The more widespread the title of party member, the better ... We could only rejoice if every striker, every demonstrator, answering for his actions [before a tsarist tribunal — BL], could proclaim himself a party member.⁷²

The party had to be as broad as possible, had to reflect the views of the entire class as closely as possible, if it wanted to express the needs and experiences of that class. "Our party is the conscious spokesman of an unconscious process", said Martov.⁷³ Lenin disagreed. Martov's striving for "elasticity", Lenin argued, would debase the party with backward elements, would dilute the "high political level" of its vanguard elements:

And in the period of party life that we are now passing through it is just this "elasticity" that undoubtedly opens the door to all elements of confusion, vacillation, and opportunism ... The need to safeguard the firmness of the party's line and the purity of its principles has now become particularly urgent, for with the restoration of its unity, the party will recruit into its ranks a great many unstable elements, whose number will increase with the growth of the party.⁷⁴

Cliff does quote from this speech of Lenin's, but he ignores the passage reproduced above. (Perhaps there was not enough room in his book?) Instead he prefers to quote from the speech in a way which makes Lenin appear bent on restricting party recruitment solely to defend the party against tsarist infiltration and repression.⁷⁵

Lenin's most definitive views on the membership dispute were set forward in the aftermath of the congress in the book *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*. Once again, however, Cliff sees fit to ignore the opinions advanced by Lenin there. So once again, let us rescue Lenin from his censor.

What *did* Lenin say in *One Step Forward*? Citing Martov's desire to allow every striker into the party, Lenin replied incredulously:

Is that so? *Every striker* should have the right to *proclaim himself a party member*? In this statement Comrade Martov instantly carries his mistake to the point of absurdity, by *lowering* Social-Democracy to the level of mere strikemaking ...

Certainly, he adds, "strikes are one of the most profound and powerful manifestations" of the class struggle. But the level of consciousness necessary to join a strike is not as high as that required of a Marxist, a Social-Democrat:

[W]e should be tail-enders if we were to *identify* this primary form of struggle, which *ipso facto* is no more than a trade unionist form, with the all-round and conscious Social-Democratic struggle. We should be opportunistically *legitimising a patent falsehood* if we were to allow every striker the right to "proclaim himself a party member", for *in the majority of cases* such a "proclamation" would be *false*. We should be indulging in

complacent daydreaming if we tried to assure ourselves and others that *every striker* can be a Social-Democrat and a member of the Social-Democratic Party, in face of the infinite disunity, oppression, and stultification which under capitalism is bound to weight down upon such very wide sections of the “untrained”, unskilled workers.⁷⁶

In general, strikes require no more than an *unconscious* (or spontaneous, or embryonically conscious) grasp of the conflict between labour and capital. It is this grasp alone which (in Cliff’s words again) “capitalism itself inculcates ... in the working class”. But to obtain true class consciousness, socialist consciousness, we need more than merely the willingness to join in — and the experiences and understanding gleaned from — strikes. Lenin explained:

“Our party is the conscious spokesman of the unconscious process” [Martov said]. Exactly. And for that very reason it is wrong to want “every striker” to have the right to call himself a party member, for if “every striker” were not only a spontaneous expression of the powerful class instinct and of the class struggle which is leading inevitably to the social revolution, but a *conscious expression* of that process, then ... then our party would forthwith and at once *embrace* the whole working class, and, consequently, would at once put an end to *bourgeois society as a whole*. If it is to be a conscious spokesman *in fact*, the party must be able to work out organisational relations which will *ensure a definite level* of consciousness and systematically raise this level.⁷⁷

Martov’s proposed standard of party membership, therefore, refused to demand of prospective members any “definite level of consciousness”, particularly as measured by their knowledge and acceptance of “Marxist texts” (like the party’s own program). One of Lenin’s supporters at the congress (Pavlovich) made this point explicitly, noting:

If we are to go the way of Martov, we should first of all delete the clause on [insisting on new members] accepting the program, for before a program can be accepted it must be mastered and understood ... Acceptance of the program presupposes a fairly high level of political consciousness.⁷⁸

Indeed it does. It was precisely to facilitate the mastering, understanding, and acceptance of that program that the original *Iskra* team had set itself the task of “creating a common literature, consistent in principle and capable of ideologically uniting revolutionary Social-Democracy” — in short, of creating stacks of “Marxist texts”. Was all that work without practical purpose, unrelated after all to the program and therefore the membership requirements of the party which *Iskra* was fighting to build?

If Martov (and now Cliff and Hallas) could not see the connection between setting high political standards of party membership and defending the integrity of the party’s program, more consistent supporters of Martov (the hard right-wingers Akimov and Lieber) certainly could. Lenin reminded the RSDLP membership:

That Comrade Pavlovich's warning regarding the program was not superfluous became apparent *at once*, during *that very same* sitting. Comrades Akimov and Lieber, who secured the adoption of Comrade Martov's formulation [on party membership criteria], *at once* betrayed their true nature by demanding ... that in the case of the program, too, only platonic acceptance, acceptance only of its "basic principle", should be required (for "membership" in the party).⁷⁹

Lenin's opponents at the congress denounced his stand in favor of a politically restricted party membership as a logical outgrowth of *What Is To Be Done?* and its alleged disdain for the intellectual powers of the working class, its repudiation of the proletariat's ability to reach class consciousness. Lenin replied that on the contrary, only the "Leninists" were fighting against debasing the concept of Social-Democratic workers, just as Lenin had done in *What Is To Be Done?* He said:

Lenin (say my critics) takes no account whatever of the fact that the workers, too, have a share in the formation of an ideology. Is this so? Have I not said time and again that the shortage of fully class-conscious workers, worker-leaders, and worker-revolutionaries is, in fact, the greatest deficiency of our movement? Have I not said there that the training of such worker-revolutionaries must be our immediate task? Is there no mention there of the importance of developing a trade-union movement and creating a special trade-union literature? Is not a desperate struggle waged there against every attempt to lower the level of the advanced workers to that of the masses, or of the average workers?⁸⁰

This defence of *What Is To Be Done?* is naturally left out of Cliff's account of the 1903 congress's proceedings. Its inclusion would have helped to show that the views expressed in the pamphlet and the views for which Lenin still fought in 1903 were indivisible.

This, then, was the broad theoretical background to the struggle at the congress cited by Cliff over democratic centralism. For Cliff, the terms of that dispute all boil down to the following:

The harsh necessity for democratic centralism within the revolutionary working-class party is derived from the harsh imperatives of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Martov and Trotsky balked at this.⁸¹

This explanation of democratic-centralism is woefully incomplete. Moreover, it completely fails to identify the central dispute between Martov and Trotsky, on the one hand, and Lenin, on the other.

The necessity for democratic centralism springs from the role which the party must play *throughout* the class struggle, of which the proletarian dictatorship is only one (albeit critically important) phase. The party exists in order to organise the political struggle of the proletarian vanguard against those elements within the proletariat who

act as carriers for bourgeois consciousness and programs. This is true because capitalism *does not* automatically bring socialist consciousness to the working class but only provides the working class with the experiences from which they *can derive* socialist consciousness. To make certain that the class does, in fact, derive the correct conclusions from its experience is a very, very difficult task. It is no less difficult decades prior to the proletarian dictatorship than it is on the very eve of the insurrection: in fact, in some ways the job is the hardest the further away is the seizure of power.

To carry out this task at all times requires a party of a specific type. It must be ideologically defined along revolutionary Marxist lines. It must recruit only those who adhere to that ideological platform as presented in the party program. It functions best when its members are the freest to discuss party policy among themselves — i.e., when the collective mind of the proletarian vanguard is able to think freely. Thus the importance of inner party democracy. Part and parcel of that democracy, however, is *centralism*: the right of the party majority to decide party policy and to impose its will on the organisation as a whole, including its leaders. Democracy is meaningless unless the majority has the right to enforce its decisions; otherwise you have not democracy but anarchy.

Moreover, the party cannot exercise any kind of decisive leadership within the proletariat as a whole unless it marshals its resources to put forward and fight for *one consistent program*, not a multitude of conflicting ones. The party must be the class's teacher. Who respects, much less depends upon, a teacher who provides a score of answers to the question "How much is two plus two?" Since the party teaches not pedantically but in the course of the class struggle, the importance of party discipline in external work is magnified tremendously. Democratic centralism is the expression of these imperatives.

Commenting upon the disputes over this question at the 1903 congress, Lenin showed the relationship between democratic centralism and the over-all nature, role, and composition of the party:

[T]he stronger our party organisations, consisting of *real* Social-Democrats, the less wavering and instability there is *within* the party, the broader, more varied, richer, and more fruitful will be the party's influence on the elements of the working-class *masses* surrounding it and guided by it. The party, as the vanguard of the working-class, must not be confused, after all, with the entire class.⁸²

We repeat: the dictatorship of the proletariat is "derived" from the fact that socialism can be attained only through uncompromising class struggle. It is from the nature of this class struggle (and from the fact that the proletariat does not automatically obtain class consciousness in the course of it) that the need for a democratic-centralist party

is derived. By isolating the dictatorship from the general class struggle of which it is in fact only one moment, and by pointing to “the harsh imperatives” of that dictatorship as the fundamental reason for imposing democratic centralism on the party, Cliff has seriously distorted Lenin’s viewpoint. This misrepresentation is directly bound up with Cliff’s general disagreement with Lenin over the nature of class consciousness and how it is reached by the proletariat and, therefore, with the role which the revolutionary party plays in the class struggle.

For Cliff, the party can play little or no role in bringing the class to self-consciousness. The “harsh necessity for democratic centralism” must in his view, therefore, arise from something separate and apart from the day-to-day waging of the class struggle. For Lenin, the party was a weapon with which the proletariat’s vanguard elements fought against the bourgeoisie’s ideological hegemony over the proletariat (and thereby its exploitation of the proletariat). Hence democratic centralism was only one characteristic of that weapon, and the value of that facet was every bit as great when the party was first forming as when it was already in control of state power. That is why Lenin fought so doggedly in 1903 for a party with a clear program, a high political level, and a strong discipline. All these were necessary not merely to exercise a class dictatorship but just as much in 1903 — “in the period of party life we are now passing through” when “the need to safeguard the firmness of the party’s line and the purity of its principles has — become particularly urgent” since “with the restoration of its unity, the party will recruit into its ranks a great many unstable elements, whose number will increase with the growth of the party”.⁸³ This is what made Trotsky and Martov “balk” in 1903.

As we have seen, they both at the time (and Martov for the rest of his life) adhered to a mechanical interpretation of the relationship between the class struggle, class consciousness, and the proletarian party. They both looked not to the party, its program, its composition, and its rules to bring self-consciousness to the class but saw both the consciousness of the class and the nature and composition of the party as simple *reflexes* of the class struggle. Trotsky, thus, objected strenuously to Lenin’s demand for strict party rules with which to combat opportunism *within* the party. This demand seemed to him voluntarist, mechanical, undialectical. Cliff quotes Trotsky to this effect but does not understand the significance of what he is quoting:

I do not believe [Trotsky said] that you can put statutory exorcism on opportunism. I do not give the statutes any sort of mystical interpretation ... Opportunism is produced by many more complex causes than one or another clause in the rules; it is brought about by the relative level of development of bourgeois democracy and the proletariat.⁸⁴

How did Lenin reply? *Cliff does not tell us*. Some pages earlier he finds ample space to

show us how Lenin could express contempt for unnecessarily lengthy party rules, mountains of red tape, and “bureaucratic formulas”.⁸⁵ He neglects to tell us how Lenin defended his own conception of the party rules presented at the 1903 congress. Thus Cliff’s readers are once again denied the opportunity to view Lenin’s understanding of the role of the party and, consequently, of the way in which it must be organised and structured. In reply to Trotsky, Lenin wrote:

The point is not that clauses in the rules may produce opportunism, but that with their help a more or less trenchant weapon against opportunism can be forged. The deeper its causes, the more trenchant should this weapon be. Therefore, to justify a formulation which opens the door to opportunism on the grounds that opportunism has “deep causes” is tailism of the first water.⁸⁶

1905: The reorganisation of the party

If Cliff is sheepish in reporting the disputes and exploring the significance of the 1903 RSDLP congress, he is positively expansive in his discussions of the views expressed by Lenin on party-building during and after the year 1905. It is Cliff’s belief that in 1905 Lenin effectively discarded the mechanical, undialectical, and un-Marxist views on party and class expressed in *What Is To Be Done?* Cliff believes that the position taken by Lenin in particular at the Third (Bolshevik) Congress of the RSDLP in 1905 is qualitatively superior because fundamentally different from the views he expressed in 1902. Indeed, says Cliff, Lenin had to war against his older and undialectical views continually: “Now the unfortunate Lenin had to persuade his supporters to oppose the *line* proposed in *What Is To Be Done?*”⁸⁷

To make it clear that Lenin’s 1905 views represented not merely a modification of the older views or an adaptation of the older views to new circumstances, Cliff insists:

On the idea that socialist consciousness could be brought in only from the “outside”, and that the working class could spontaneously achieve only trade-union consciousness, Lenin now formulated his conclusions in terms which were the exact opposite of those of *What Is To Be Done?* In an article called “The Reorganisation of the Party”, written in November 1905, he says bluntly: “The working class is instinctively, spontaneously Social-Democratic.”⁸⁸

Cliff bolsters this assertion by adding that:

A few years later, in an article commemorating the 1905 revolution, Lenin goes even further in expressing the view that *capitalism itself* inculcates a socialist *consciousness* in the working class.⁸⁹

And just what policy was Lenin now proposing in defence of which it was necessary to repudiate *What Is To Be Done?* According to Cliff, Lenin now declared in favor of

throwing open wide the doors of the party to the entire mass of the working class. As Cliff recounts it:

In a pamphlet called *New Times* [sic] and *New Forces*, he called even more vehemently for the party to be opened up ... At the third Congress, in the spring of 1905, Lenin and Bogdanov proposed a resolution urging the party to open up its gates wide to workers ...⁹⁰

And further:

During this period he [Lenin] called continually for the party to be opened up to *the mass of workers*.

So extreme was Lenin's intention to have the Bolshevik Party "opened up to the mass of workers", Cliff argues, that Lenin even demanded that "The party doors should be *wide open* even to religious workers, if they were *opponents* of the employers and the government".⁹¹ (This last opinion, says Cliff, was expressed by Lenin in his article "Our Tasks and the Soviet of Workers' Deputies".)

Such is Cliff's rendition. Now let us see what Lenin really wrote. We begin with the context. The year 1905 witnessed a massive working-class upsurge in Russia. In the course of that upsurge, the working class formed councils (soviets) of democratically elected representatives which conducted their struggle. This was unquestionably the high-water mark of mass working-class activity up until that time. It was very much the result of the working-class masses (and especially their most politically advanced elements) drawing lessons from their previous struggles against employers and the autocracy. The previous decade of tireless propagandistic and agitational activity of the Social-Democracy played an important role in assisting the masses to draw *correct* lessons from those experiences. Ever-larger numbers of workers learned in mere months, weeks, and days that the Marxist vanguard had been fundamentally correct in their prognoses and prescriptions during that decade as well as in 1905 itself. As a result of this process, the number of Social-Democratic-minded workers was growing at an unprecedented pace in Russia, although the manner in which they absorbed their Social-Democracy certainly differed from the manner which predominated during earlier years of relative social quiescence.

In "New Tasks and New Forces", Lenin explained that "The development of a mass working-class movement in Russia in connection with the development of Social-Democracy" is marked by "transitions":

Each of these transitions was prepared, on the one hand, by socialist thought working mainly in one direction, and on the other, by profound changes that had taken place in the conditions of life and in the whole mentality of the working class, as well as by the fact that increasingly wider strata of the working class were aroused to more

conscious and active struggle.⁹²

The conditions and stepped-up rate at which these strata were coming to Social-Democratic consciousness in 1905 was one aspect of this transition, in which “at the present time far greater significance in the matter of [political] training and education attaches to the military operations, which *teach* the untrained precisely and entirely in *our* sense. We must remember that our ‘doctrinaire’ faithfulness to Marxism is now being reinforced by the march of revolutionary events, which is everywhere furnishing *object lessons to the masses* and that all these lessons confirm our dogma.”⁹³

This new situation produced what Lenin referred to as the “new forces” available for swelling the ranks of Social-Democracy. This was in addition to the number of workers who had been Social-Democrats subjectively even before 1905 but who could not safely enrol in the party *per se* because of the former effectiveness of the tsarist repression. The newly (if temporarily) won freedom to organise added these individuals to the ranks of Lenin’s potential “new forces” as well. That same freedom, in addition, made it *necessary* for the party to draw those workers (Social-Democratic workers) into direct action under the guidance of the party and into direct control over the party apparatus and policy, to shoulder the party’s “new tasks”.

This is how Lenin appraised the developments within the working class. In what way does this represent a repudiation of *What Is To Be Done?* Cliff quotes Lenin’s observation in the article, “The Reorganisation of the Party” to the effect that “The working class is instinctively, spontaneously Social-Democratic”, and concludes that this observation embodied a rejection of the view that “socialist *consciousness* could be brought in only from the ‘outside’, and that the working class could spontaneously achieve only trade-union *consciousness*”. Cliff further argues that this new discovery of Lenin’s was the reason why he altered his approach to recruitment into the party. This is totally incorrect.

To begin with, Cliff has butchered the quotation from Lenin. Where Cliff chooses to place a period and complete Lenin’s sentence, Lenin himself preferred to place a comma and then to complete his thought. Thus, he actually said this:

The working class is instinctively, spontaneously Social-Democratic, and more than 10 years of work put in by Social-Democracy has done a great deal to *transform this spontaneity into consciousness*.⁹⁴

This looks a bit different, doesn’t it? The first half of the sentence merely repeats in substance what Lenin had been saying for years, that in its “spontaneous” existence and strivings — i.e., in its unconscious or embryonically conscious being — the working class is indeed driven toward socialism. But the second half of the sentence supplies the second half of Lenin’s analysis of party and class. This “unconscious” striving on

the part of the workers requires the organised intervention of the class's vanguard in order to "transform this spontaneity into consciousness", in order to come to the aid of the unconscious (as Lenin put it in *What Is To Be Done?*). Far from being a repudiation of Lenin's earlier views, the passage triumphantly misquoted by Cliff only restates them — and records the successes achieved by the vanguard which guided itself by them.

The point is not merely to expose Cliff's dishonesty (shameful as it is) but to really understand what Lenin is saying here. Ten years of work put in by the vanguard was now, in combination with the new "object lessons" provided by "the march of revolutionary events", yielding unprecedented numbers of workers who were Social-Democratic not merely in their unconscious yearnings and strivings but in their *consciousness*. This is the fact upon which Lenin bases his new policy on recruitment into the party.

Next, we have to examine Lenin's evaluation of his already-existing party apparatus in 1905. This evaluation was the second factor which entered into the formulation of his party-building policies in that year. In this regard, the holding of the Bolshevik Third RSDLP Congress is very important. That congress represented an organisational breach with Menshevism and thus the establishment formally of a party standing on clear and thoroughly revolutionary principles. This was possible, moreover, only as the result of a protracted ideological war with Menshevism (and before that, Economism), a war which had driven the principles of Bolshevism deeply into the consciousness of the Bolshevik cadres. In consequence, the Marxist vanguard was far more ideologically and organisationally stable in 1905 than it had been at any time in the past and was therefore more resistant to the dangers of opportunistic infection than ever before. With such an organisation it was possible to undertake tasks and responsibilities which could (and in the past actually did) wreck organisations with less stability. The disintegration of the vanguard into the ranks of the mass (i.e., as in the case of Economism's birth) would present itself as a danger to the Bolsheviks in 1905, wrote Lenin, only "If we showed any inclination towards demagoguery, if we lacked party principles (program, tactical rules, organisational experience) entirely, or if those principles were feeble and shaky. But the fact is that no such 'ifs' exist".⁹⁵

This sentence of Lenin's Cliff quotes, too. But in place of the two sentences which followed it in Lenin's original article, Cliff inserts three dots before resuming the text. Perhaps this is because Cliff does not approve of the point which Lenin himself was making in those sentences? Here is the material deleted by Cliff:

We Bolsheviks have never shown any inclination toward demagoguery. On the contrary, we have always fought resolutely, openly, and straightforwardly against the slightest

attempts at demagoguery; we have demanded class-consciousness from those joining the party, we have insisted on the tremendous importance of continuity in the party's development, we have preached *discipline* and demanded that every party member be trained in one or another of the party organisations.⁹⁶

Because the Bolsheviks had consistently demanded discipline and class-consciousness from those joining the ranks (in other words, because Lenin had always insisted upon "a high political level" in the membership), Lenin could now point out that "Social-Democracy has established a name for itself, has created a trend and has built up cadres of Social-Democratic workers". These gave the party "a steadfast and solid core of Social-Democrats" which could withstand a great deal of alien-class pressure.⁹⁷

Here, then, were the pillars of Lenin's thinking regarding party-building — party organisation and recruitment — in 1905. First, the presence of a rapidly growing number of *conscious Social-Democratic* but still non-party workers; second, the existence of a politically educated, selectively recruited, and organisationally disciplined network of Marxist cadres; third, a massive mobilisation of the working class as a whole which was clearly becoming a full-scale confrontation with the entire ruling class and its state.

Now what was the party policy constructed by Lenin which rested upon these analytical pillars? We have already quoted *Cliff's* summary of it: the party must be "opened up to the mass of workers". Lenin's actual policy was rather different, however.

Certainly, Lenin was now for drastically increasing the number of workers included in the membership and the leadership of the party. But he was talking about the class-conscious workers, the consciously Social-Democratic workers. It is not possible to read Lenin's writings in this period conscientiously without acknowledging this fact. Even Tony Cliff is unable to produce a single quotation from Lenin which calls for the kind of politically *indiscriminate* recruitment of workers which Cliff claims Lenin desired.

Lenin was naturally anxious to transform the Bolshevik organisation into a workers' party — but he aimed to accomplish this by drawing into the party the growing number of class-conscious workers. This is the message of the article "New Tasks and New Forces". It demands that the party recognise that there are new Social-Democratic forces arising daily in the midst of the revolutionary upsurge. It demands that the party find ways to integrate these forces into its own ranks. To be sure, Lenin says, the new forces lack experience, training, and education. This is because the circumstances in which they are rising are so different from the non-revolutionary years of the past. But this only means that the party must adapt itself to the new needs of the worker-socialists. In essence, Lenin is instructing the Bolshevik Party in the new manner in which it must apply its long-standing insistence on being the party of the working-class vanguard to a fast-moving revolutionary situation:

A revolutionary epoch is to the Social-Democrats what war-time is to an army. We must broaden the cadres of our army, we must advance them from peace strength to war strength, we must mobilise the reservists, recall the furloughed and form new auxiliary corps, units, and services. We must not forget that in war we necessarily and inevitably have to put up with less trained replacements, and to speed up and simplify the promotion of soldiers to officers' rank.⁹⁸

To avoid being misunderstood, Lenin reiterated in the same article the continuing importance of fighting all pressures on the party to lower its political guard. The party must not cease to speak and act as the vanguard; it must not become the voice of the more backward, petty-bourgeois-minded workers. That, he pointed out, was the way in which the Mensheviks were reacting to the new situation, relapsing into the worst Economist, tailist formulations of party tasks.

Once again [Lenin wrote], excessive (and very often foolish) repetition of the word "class" and the belittlement of the party's tasks in regard to the class are used to justify the fact that Social-Democracy is lagging behind the urgent needs of the proletariat. The slogan "workers' independent activity" is again being misused by people who worship the lower forms of activity and ignore the higher forms of really Social-Democratic independent activity, the really revolutionary initiative of the proletariat itself.⁹⁹

Lenin demanded the creation of hundreds of new party organisations into which the socialist workers must be organised. He emphatically did *not* call for bringing huge non-Social-Democratic masses into the party itself. Rather, such people must be organised into separate, auxiliary organisations:

Let all such [newly organised workers'] circles, except those that are avowedly non-Social-Democratic, either directly join the party or align themselves with the party. In the latter event we must not demand that they accept our program or that they necessarily enter into organisational relations with us ... these circles of sympathisers [will tend] under the impact of events to be transformed at first into democratic assistants and then into convinced members of the Social-Democratic working-class party.¹⁰⁰

Later that year, Lenin continued to elaborate the viewpoint contained in "New Tasks and New Forces". The committee-men within the Bolshevik party resisted Lenin's proposals, fearing that the introduction into the organisation of such untrained workers will mean diluting the party's program and principles. In reply, Lenin pointed out once again that the workers being brought into the party would overwhelmingly be Social-Democratic. We have already quoted part of this discussion, in which Lenin pointed to the existence of a firm party cadre as a guarantee against the party's dissolution into

backwardness. Here is the entire passage:

Let us not exaggerate the dangers, comrades. Social-Democracy has established a name for itself, has created a trend and has built up cadres of Social-Democratic workers. And now that the heroic proletariat has proved by deeds its readiness to fight consistently and in a body for *clearly understood aims*, to fight in a *purely Social-Democratic spirit*, it would be simply ridiculous to doubt that the workers who belong to our party, or who will join it tomorrow at the invitation of the Central Committee, will be *Social-Democrats in 99 cases out of 100*. The working class is instinctively, spontaneously Social-Democratic, and more than ten years of work put in by Social-Democracy has done a great deal to transform this spontaneity into consciousness.¹⁰¹

Yes, there *will* be the 1% which is not Social-Democratic at all. In a time of mass recruitment, this is unavoidable. And yes, even the 99% will be politically unstable because only newly and rapidly won to Social-Democracy. Lenin's reaction was not to celebrate this instability, much less to demand that "the party doors should be wide open even to religious workers, if they were opponents of the employers and the government" (as Cliff alleges). No, Lenin pointed once more to the party's hard-won possession of a firm Bolshevik cadre who *were* well-educated, politically developed, selectively recruited, and time-tested. This cadre would safeguard the party's principles during the difficult new turn in party policy:

Don't invent bugaboos, comrades! Don't forget that in every live and growing party there will always be elements of instability, vacillation, and wavering. But these elements can be influenced, and they will submit to the influence of the steadfast and solid core of Social-Democrats.¹⁰²

And once again, Lenin made clear that the Bolshevik Party "calls upon all *worker Social-Democrats* to join such [party] organisations".¹⁰³

Now in fact there were people who looked around in 1905 and concluded that the time had, indeed, come to throw party doors wide open to all workers. These same people, like Cliff today, read Lenin's "New Tasks and New Forces" and concluded that Lenin agreed with them, that Lenin had abandoned the views he defended in 1902 and 1903. These people were the Mensheviks.

Cliff could have helped his readers to understand Lenin's 1905 views on the party by discussing the Menshevik outlook in that year and the polemic which Lenin conducted against it. Since Cliff prefers to avoid the subject, we will round out the picture here. In an article aptly entitled "The Guilty Blaming the Innocent" in April 1905, Lenin set the record straight on who was advocating what policy. He wrote:

[The Menshevik] *Iskra* says that the editorial in issue number 9 of *Vperyod*, "New Tasks and New Forces", by insisting on the necessity of considerably increasing the number

of party organisations of every description, contradicts the spirit of Clause 1 of the Rules as formulated by Lenin, who, in defending his idea at the [1903] Congress, had urged the necessity of narrowing the concept of the party. The objection raised by *Iskra* can be recommended as a high-school problem in logic to train young people in debating. The Bolsheviks have always held that the party should be limited to the sum-total of party organisations and that the number of these organisations should be increased ...

Iskra, Lenin explained, could not distinguish between expanding the size (“framework”) of the party and lowering the political level (“concept”) of the party:

The new *Iskra* confounds extension of the party’s *framework* with the extension of the *concept* of the party ... To explain this perplexing riddle, we shall give a plain, easy illustration: let us assume for the sake of simplicity an army consisting exclusively of men of a single arm of the service; the manpower of the army must be narrowed down to a total of men who have actually proved themselves able to shoot, with none allowed to get past with general phrases or verbal assurances of military fitness; after that, every effort must be made to increase the number of men who can pass the rifleman’s test.

Aren’t you beginning to see a glimmer of light, gentlemen of the new *Iskra*?

The Mensheviks’ *Iskra* attempted to prove that Lenin had abandoned his 1902-3 views on who belongs in the party by misrepresenting the meaning of certain passages in “New Tasks and New Forces”. All this confusion-mongering was calculated to excuse their own genuinely — and consistently — opportunistic attitude:

Is it not clear [wrote Lenin] that *Iskra* is simply juggling, confounding what was “previously needed” for joining the party with “what is now permitted” for *aligned* groups?

Like Cliff, the Mensheviks ignored Lenin’s distinction between transforming the party itself and creating new “auxiliary” organisations for non-party people. All this was intended simply to blur the clear line which had always — and which still — separated Bolshevism from Menshevism, the line which currently separated the Bolshevik *Vperyod* from the Menshevik *Iskra*. Lenin therefore directed his readers’ attention back to that clear line of division:

Vperyod’s slogan [this year] was: Organise new forces for the new tasks into party organisations or, at least, into organisations aligned with the party. *Iskra*’s slogan is: “Open the doors wider!” The one says: “Take new marksmen into your regiments, organise those who are learning to shoot into auxiliary units.” The others say: “Open the doors wider! Let all comers enrol themselves in the army, any way they please!”¹⁰⁴

“Open the doors wider!” It is clear, now, how Cliff has become confused about Lenin’s party-building prescription in 1905. He has mixed up Lenin, once again, with his

opponents. Promising to show the history and principles of Bolshevism, he has instead shown us the thinking which gave rise to and sustained Menshevism.

Conclusion

We began this article by emphasising the importance of studying the experience of Bolshevism. That study is essential if the present generation of revolutionary socialists is truly to stand on Lenin's shoulders. We have shown that Tony Cliff's contribution to this necessary study is overwhelmingly negative. He has consistently misinterpreted or polemicised against Lenin's central ideas in a fundamentally Menshevik spirit. On every key question and at every critical historical juncture, Cliff has falsified the record of Bolshevism — regarding the character and causes of Economism; the nature, methods, and purpose of Lenin's *Iskra*; the centrality of the advanced workers in the construction of the proletarian party; the defining point and lasting value of *What Is To Be Done?*; the reasons for and political significance of the 1903 split in the RSDLP; and, finally, Lenin's response to the events of 1905.

Cliff's anti-Leninist views on these subjects were foreshadowed in his own previous writings: they are also the foundations on which he has constructed his own organisation, the International Socialists. The IS of both Great Britain and the US stand squarely in the tradition of the Economists and the Mensheviks.

The need to study and assess in detail the construction and tempering of the Bolshevik Party remains before us. Whoever undertakes such work can, however, learn more than one lesson from Cliff's failure. For one thing, a serious study of Bolshevism will have to ground itself in a far more careful and honest survey of Lenin's own writings than has gone into Cliff's *Lenin*. In addition, it will have to take far more seriously than has Tony Cliff one of Cliff's own favourite nostrums: "If [Lenin] is cited on any tactical or organisational question, the concrete issues which the movement was facing at the time must be absolutely clear".¹⁰⁵

But most important of all, the author of any serious study of Leninism will have to be politically in tune with Lenin himself. It is not possible to learn from Lenin if you cannot see his world through his eyes. You cannot do this if you begin, as did Tony Cliff, with political premises fundamentally alien to those of Lenin himself. Indeed, Cliff's failure is only fresh evidence in support of a conclusion reached by Leon Trotsky some 50 years ago: "One can understand and recognise Lenin for what he is only after becoming a Bolshevik."¹⁰⁶ ■

Appendix

On Lenin's 'Unfortunate Kautskyan Formula'

By Doug Lorimer

In his otherwise convincing polemical review of Tony Cliff's *Lenin*, Bruce Landau claims that in *What Is To Be Done?* Lenin "employed a formula borrowed from Karl Kautsky which incorrectly argued that the socialist vanguard necessarily originates outside the ranks of the working class as a whole". Furthermore, Landau claims that this "formula in fact ran counter to the main theme of *What Is To Be Done?*, which correctly identified the vanguard with the proletariat's own most advanced elements fused with Marxist intellectuals from other classes". The "unfortunate" and "erroneous" formula that Lenin borrowed from Kautsky was, according to Landau, this one:

The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own efforts, is able to develop only trade-union consciousness ... i.e., the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers, and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labour legislation, etc. The theory of socialism, however, grew out of the philosophical, 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 intelligentsia.

Landau also claims that Lenin "subsequently abandoned this incorrect framing of the problem". In a footnote Landau refers readers to Lenin's 1907 "Preface to the Collection *Twelve Years*" for proof of this claim. However, nowhere in the preface does Lenin

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repudiate the thesis that “the working class, exclusively by its own efforts [i.e., without the conscious intervention of socialist ideologists — DL], is able to develop only trade-union consciousness”; that the scientific theory of socialism “grew out of the philosophical, historical, and economic theories elaborated by ... intellectuals”; and that the “theoretical doctrine of Social-Democracy [i.e., Marxism] arose altogether independently of the spontaneous growth of the working-class movement”. Rather, in the preface Lenin acknowledged that *What Is To Be Done?* had “exaggerated the idea of the organisation of professional revolutionaries”¹ — i.e., that it had argued for the membership of such an organisation to be confined to those “who have been professionally trained in the art of combating the political police”.²

As further “proof” of his claim that Lenin “subsequently abandoned” the views expressed in *What Is To Be Done?* on the relationship between socialist consciousness (socialist theory) and the spontaneous consciousness of the working-class movement, Landau refers readers to “Trotsky’s *Stalin* and its discussion of the idea that ‘revolutionary class-consciousness was brought to the proletariat from the outside, by Marxist intellectuals’”. Landau then cites the following quote from Trotsky’s unfinished 1940 biography of Stalin:

The author of *What Is To Be Done?* himself subsequently acknowledged the biased nature, and therewith the erroneousness, of his theory, which he had parenthetically interjected as a battery in the battle against ‘Economism’ and its deference to the elemental nature of the labour movement.

What evidence does Trotsky cite to back-up this *assertion*? None!

Having decided that Lenin’s “formula” is “erroneous” — perhaps, because as a Trotskyist, Landau feels obliged to accept Trotsky’s assertion that it is — Landau offers the following critique of Lenin’s “bad formula”:

The Marxist vanguard is defined politically, not sociologically. It is true that Marxism was first formulated by bourgeois intellectuals. It is also true that young Marxist movements frequently obtain their first cadres largely from among such intellectuals. It is not true, however, that Marxism evolved as the result of simple intellectual evolution independent of and *uninfluenced* by the rise of the working-class movement. And it is not correct to pose Marxism as a doctrine which only intellectuals can arrive at on their own. [Emphasis added.]

The first sentence, of course, is true. But one wonders who it is directed against. It certainly isn’t Lenin, since nowhere in the paragraph from *What Is To Be Done?* that Landau cites does Lenin “define the Marxist vanguard” sociologically, rather than politically. Indeed, Lenin does not even refer to the “Marxist vanguard”, but instead discusses the question of where socialist theory originates, i.e., “out of the philosophical,

historical, and economic theories elaborated by ... intellectuals”.

This, of course, is the “formula” that Lenin “borrowed” from Kautsky, quoting the following comments of Kautsky on the new (1901) program adopted by the Austrian Social-Democrats:

Many of our revisionist critics believe that Marx asserted that economic development and the class struggle create, not only the conditions for socialist production, but also, and directly, the *consciousness* (K.K.’s italics) of its necessity. And these critics assert that England, the country most highly developed capitalistically, is more remote than any other from this consciousness. Judging by the draft, one might assume that this allegedly orthodox-Marxist view, which is thus refuted, was shared by the committee that drafted the Austrian program. In the draft program it is stated: “The more capitalist development increases the numbers of the proletariat, the more the proletariat is compelled and becomes fit to fight against capitalism. The proletariat becomes conscious” of the possibility and of the necessity for socialism. In this connection socialist consciousness appears to be a necessary and direct result of the proletarian class struggle. But it is absolutely untrue. Of course, socialism, as a doctrine, has its roots in modern economic relationships just as the class struggle of the proletariat has, and, like the latter, emerges from the struggle against the capitalist-created poverty and misery of the masses. But socialism and the class struggle arise side by side and not one out of the other; each arises under different conditions. Modern socialist consciousness can arise only on the basis of profound scientific knowledge. Indeed, modern economic science is as much a condition for socialist production as, say, modern technology, and the proletariat can create neither the one nor the other, no matter how much it may desire to do so; both arise out of the modern social process. The vehicle of science is not the proletariat, but the *bourgeois intelligentsia* (K.K.’s italics): it was in the minds of individual members of this stratum that modern socialism originated, and it was they who communicated it to the more intellectually developed proletarians who, in their turn, introduce it into the proletarian class struggle where conditions allow that to be done. Thus, socialist consciousness is something introduced into the proletarian class struggle from without and not something that arose within it spontaneously. Accordingly, the old Hainfeld program quite rightly stated that the task of Social-Democracy is to imbue (literally: saturate the proletariat — Lenin) with the *consciousness* of its position and the consciousness of its task.³

In *What Is To Be Done?* Lenin describes the above comments by Kautsky as “profoundly true”. Landau however considers them “erroneous” because they “argued that the socialist vanguard necessarily originates outside the ranks of the working class as a whole”.

But Landau's next sentence acknowledges the correctness of this observation of Kautsky's and Lenin's: "It is true that Marxism was first formulated by bourgeois intellectuals" (i.e., Marx and Engels). It was these two "educated representatives of the propertied classes" (as Lenin put it); these two "individual members" of the "bourgeois intelligentsia" (as Kautsky put it); these two "bourgeois ideologists" who raised themselves to "the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole" (as Marx and Engels themselves put it in the *Communist Manifesto*) — who brought socialist consciousness (the scientific theory of Marxism) into the spontaneous "proletarian class struggle". This is an irrefutable historical fact.

What then is wrong with the Kautsky-Lenin "formula"? Is it the idea that "only intellectuals can arrive at" Marxist theory "on their own"? While Lenin did not explicitly make such a claim, Landau has himself already acknowledged its truthfulness. *Only* (two) intellectuals — Marx and Engels — *have arrived on their own* at "Marxism as a doctrine", i.e., at a scientific theory of socialism.

Is it the idea that the "theoretical doctrine" of Marxism "arose altogether independently of the spontaneous growth of the working-class movement"; that "it arose as a natural and inevitable outcome of thought among the revolutionary intelligentsia"? Landau claims that Lenin "borrowed" this idea from Kautsky. However, Lenin first enunciated the idea in his 1899 article "A Retrograde Trend in Russian Social-Democracy", i.e., three years before Kautsky's article on the draft program of the Austrian Social-Democracy was printed:

At first socialism and the working-class movement existed separately in all European countries. The workers struggled against capitalism, they organised strikes and unions, while the socialists stood aside from the working-class movement, formulating doctrines criticising the contemporary capitalist bourgeois system of society and demanding its replacement by another system, the higher socialist system. The separation of the working-class movement and socialism gave rise to weakness and underdevelopment in each: the theories of the socialists, unfused with the workers' struggle, remained nothing more than utopias, good wishes that had no effect on real life; the working-class movement remained petty, fragmented, and did not acquire political significance, it was not enlightened by the advanced science of its time. For this reason we see in all European countries a constantly growing urge to fuse socialism with the working-class movement in a single Social-Democratic movement. When this fusion takes place the class struggle of the workers becomes the conscious struggle of the proletariat to emancipate itself from exploitation by the propertied classes, it is evolved into a higher form of the socialist workers' movement — the independent working-class Social-Democratic Party. By directing socialism towards a fusion with the working-class

movement, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels did their greatest service: they created a revolutionary theory that explained the necessity for this fusion and gave socialists the task of organising the class struggle of the proletariat.⁴

The original source of these ideas about the relationship between socialism and the (spontaneous) workers' movement — which are the foundation for Lenin's conception of the role and tasks of the revolutionary Marxist party — was not Kautsky, but Engels. In an article on "Socialism in Germany" written in October 1891 at the request of the French Workers' Party and subsequently widely translated into other European languages, Engels pointed out that the Communist movement had arisen as a result of "the fusion" of "two independent tendencies": on the one hand, "a workers' movement", and on the other, "a theoretical movement, emerging from the collapse of the Hegelian philosophy", which "from its origins, was dominated by the name of Marx". The "*Communist Manifesto* of January 1848", Engels explained, "marks the fusion of these two tendencies, a fusion made complete and irrevocable in the furnace of revolution, in which everyone, workers and philosophers alike, shared equally the personal cost".⁵

In the passage in *What Is To Be Done?* which Landau claims is an "erroneous formulation" borrowed from Kautsky, Lenin was merely restating the indisputable historical fact that the doctrine of scientific socialism arose outside ("independently") of the workers' movement. But while he himself acknowledges the truth of Lenin's (and Engels') "formulation", Landau feels obliged to distance himself from it. He does this by caricaturing the formulation — and portraying Lenin as an ahistorical idealist!

Lenin, following Engels, states that Marxism arose "independently of the growth of the spontaneous working-class movement", growing "out of the philosophical, historical and economic theories elaborated by educated representatives of the propertied classes, by intellectuals". Landau, however, claims that Lenin (following Kautsky) argued that Marxism arose "as a simple intellectual evolution independent of *and uninfluenced* by the rise of the working-class movement" (Emphasis added). Of course, neither Kautsky nor Lenin presented such an ahistorical explanation of the origins of Marxism, i.e., that its emergence had *no connection* with the rise of capitalist social relations!

What Landau appears to find most unpalatable about Lenin's formulation in *What Is To Be Done?* is its logical conclusion, i.e., that "workers could not become Marxists without the 'outside' aid of intellectuals", as Landau puts it. Ironically, while arguing that this was *not* the "real point" of Lenin's general argument in *What Is To Be Done?*, Landau himself unwittingly demonstrates that it was:

Lenin's own point was not that ... workers could not become Marxists without the "outside" aid of intellectuals. His real point was that Marxist consciousness will not

arise among the mass of workers “spontaneously” — i.e., as a simple reflex of the struggle against the employer. Worker-Marxists will arise only as a result of the process Lenin had described three years earlier in “A Retrograde Trend in Russian Social-Democracy”. The advanced workers would have to do more than merely mull over their own experiences in the class struggle. They would have to “study, study, study, and turn themselves into conscious Social-Democrats — ‘the working-class intelligentsia’”. In this process the workers would have to be assisted by those workers who had accomplished this goal even earlier and by Marxists drawn from the bourgeois intelligentsia as well.

But what would the advanced workers (and those workers *and* intellectuals who had transformed themselves into Marxists “even earlier”) “study, study, study” to transform themselves into “conscious” socialists, if not the writings of an earlier generation of *Marxist intellectuals*, i.e., the writings of Marx and Engels?

Contrary to Landau’s concession to Cliff’s idolisation of the spontaneous workers’ movement, there was no contradiction between the “driving thoughts of *What Is To Be Done?*” and the allegedly “bad formula” Lenin “borrowed from Kautsky” (in reality, from Marx and Engels). The “driving thoughts” of *What Is To Be Done?* were undoubtedly “richer” than this “formula”. But this is because they *flowed from* it and *enriched* it. As a result, Lenin produced a profound deepening of the Marxist theory of the development of revolutionary consciousness within the working class, and thus of the tasks and character of the revolutionary working-class party. ■

Notes

Lenin & the Bolshevik Party

- 1 Duncan Hallas, "Building the Revolutionary Party", *International Socialism* 79, June 1975, p. 17.
- 2 Tony Cliff, *Rosa Luxemburg* (Socialist Review Publishing Co.: London, 1959, 1968), p. 41. Emphasis added.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p.45. Emphasis added.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p.49.
- 5 *Loc. cit.*
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 48.
- 7 *Ibid.* (1959 edition), p. 54.
- 8 *Ibid.* (1968 edition), p. 54.
- 9 Cliff, "Trotsky on Substitutionism", in *Party and Class*, pp. 26-27; originally published in *International Socialism* 2, Autumn 1960. Original emphasis.
- 10 *Ibid.* Emphasis added.
- 11 Trotsky, *My Life* (Pathfinder Press: New York, 1970), p. 162.
- 12 Cliff, "Trotsky on Substitutionism", *op. cit.*, p. 27.
- 13 Trotsky, *Lenin: Notes for a Biographer* (Capricorn: New York, 1971), p. 31.
- 14 Cliff, *Lenin*, p. 48.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 60.
- 17 Theodore Dan, *The Origins of Bolshevism* (Schocken, New York, 1970), pp. 218-219.
- 18 Martov, *Zapiski Sotsialdemokrata*, emphasis added. (Quoted in Dan, *op. cit.*, p. 198.)
- 19 Grigory Zinoviev, *History of the Bolshevik Party: From the Beginnings to February 1917* (New Park Publications: London, 1973), p. 69.
- 20 Quoted in Dan, *op. cit.*, p. 218.
- 21 Quoted in Leopold Haimson, *The Russian Marxists and the Origins of Bolshevism* (Beacon Press: Boston, 1966), p. 123.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 122.

- 23 Lenin, "Our Immediate Task", 1899, *Collected Works*, Vol. 4 (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1960), p. 216. Emphasis added. (Quoted in Cliff, *Lenin*, pp. 79-82.)
- 24 Lenin, *ibid.*, p. 217.
- 25 Lenin, "What Is To Be Done?" (1902), *Collected Works*, Vol. 5 (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1961), p. 378. Original emphasis.
- 26 Cliff, *Lenin*, p. 82.
- 27 Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 5, pp. 386, 387. Original emphasis.
- 28 For this evaluation of the RSDLP cadres and the tasks which Lenin posed for them on that basis, see Lenin, "The Tasks of the Russian Social-Democrats" (1897), *Collected Works*, Vol. 2 (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1960), pp. 328-329, 330.
- 29 Cliff, *Lenin*, p. 59.
- 30 Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 4, p. 278.
- 31 Cliff takes note of this fact (as on pp. 42-45) but seems able to understand it only as more proof of "an excessive emphasis on theory" *per se*.
- 32 Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 4, pp. 279-280.
- 33 *Ibid.*, pp. 280-281.
- 34 Lenin, "Apropos of the Profession de Foi", *Collected Works*, Vol. 4, p. 292.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 291.
- 36 *Ibid.*, pp. 291-292.
- 37 Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 4, pp. 281-283. See also Lenin's "Preface to the Pamphlet *May Days in Kharkov*", *Collected Works*, Vol. 4, p. 361.
- 38 The RSDLP was formally founded at its first congress in 1898, but as a result of police persecution it remained an organisational fiction until 1903.
- 39 Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 4, pp. 354-355.
- 40 Lenin stood by this narrow perspective, a far narrower one than he had projected in 1897. He explained why in the preface to the second (1902) edition to his 1897 pamphlet, *The Tasks of the Russian Social-Democrats*. The ambitious plans for mass agitational work projected in that pamphlet, Lenin explained in 1902, reflected the fact that "the Social-Democracy was [still] ideologically united" and that therefore "the main attention of the Social-Democrats was centred not on clearing up and deciding various internal party questions ... but on the ideological struggle against opponents of Social-Democracy, on the one hand, and on the development of party work, on the other. There was (as yet) no such antagonism between the theory and practice of the Social-Democrats as existed in the period of 'economism.' The pamphlet in question reflects the specific features of the then situation and 'tasks' of Social-Democracy. It calls for deeper and more widespread practical work, seeing no 'obstacles' whatever to this in lack of clarity on any of the general views, principles, or theories, seeing no difficulty (at that time there was none) in combining the

political struggle with the economic”. In the next period of Social-Democracy’s history — “the third period”, in Lenin’s concept, “that of the domination (or at least the wide spread) of the ‘economist’ trend, beginning with 1897-98” — the appearance of the new “obstacles” to successful mass work required a turn inward in order to remove those obstacles by political combat within Social-Democracy itself. (*Collected Works*, Vol. 6 (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1961), pp. 211-213.) This third period lasted until about mid-1902, by which time the *Iskra* group had succeeded in winning the allegiance of most RSDLP circles in Russia. Until then, Lenin refused to be sidetracked from the narrow, inner-party focus. In April 1901 he wrote to Plekhanov that “we are in complete agreement with you about the priority of organisation [of the party] over agitation at the present time”. (*Collected Works*, Vol. 36 (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1966), p. 78.) He made the same point once again in his preface to the pamphlet *May Days In Kharkov*. In July 1901, Lenin sent a scolding letter to *Iskra* agent S.O. Tsederbaum, Martov’s brother, who had called for making the *Iskra* literature more “popular” and for spreading the group’s human and material resources more thinly in order to reach broader layers of the Russian working class. Lenin attacked Tsederbaum for “beginning to think that we must descend to a lower level, from the advanced workers to the ‘mass’”. He added: “The *Iskra* organisation exists to support and develop the paper, and to unite the party through it, and not for the dispersion of our forces, of which there is more than enough without this organisation.” (*Collected Works*, Vol. 34 (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1966), pp. 77-78.) In fact, there was no real organisation of *Iskra* agents in Russia until January 1902, by which time *Iskra* had finally won over enough RSDLP members to hold a small congress in Samara. Lenin was careful to limit the organisational and activist perspectives of his supporters to those which were within their actual abilities, given their number and cohesion. Those perspectives broadened only in step with the growth of the *Iskra* organisation itself. (See footnote 70 in *Collected Works*, Vol. 6.)

- 41 Lenin, “Preface to the Collection *Twelve Years*”, 1908, *Collected Works*, Vol. 13 (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1962), p. 104.
- 42 Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 5, p. 386.
- 43 Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 5, p. 386 (footnote).
- 44 *Ibid.*, p. 374.
- 45 *Ibid.*, pp. 382-383.
- 46 *Ibid.*, p. 384.
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 375-376.
- 48 Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 13, pp. 106-108. Here Lenin scores Plekhanov for treating *What Is To Be Done?* in the same cavalier manner as has Cliff, i.e., focusing on the “from the outside” formula in order to distort the meaning of the pamphlet as a whole. Plekhanov’s

attacks, wrote Lenin, were “based on phrases torn out of context, on particular expressions which I had not quite adroitly or precisely formulated. Moreover, he ignored the general content and the whole spirit of my pamphlet *What Is To Be Done? ...*” See also Trotsky’s *Stalin* and its discussion of the idea that “revolutionary class-consciousness was brought to the proletariat from the outside, by Marxist intellectuals”. Trotsky notes, “The author of *What Is To Be Done?* himself subsequently acknowledged the biased nature, and therewith the erroneousness, of his theory, which he had parenthetically interjected as a battery in the battle against ‘Economism’ and its deference to the elemental nature of the labour movement.” (Leon Trotsky, *Stalin: An Appraisal of the Man and His Influence* [Grossett and Dunlap: New York, copyright 1941], p. 58.)

- 49 Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 5. p. 384 (footnote).
- 50 Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 5. p. 450.
- 51 Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 5. p. 451.
- 52 Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 5. p. 470.
- 53 Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 5. p. 500.
- 54 Cliff, *Lenin*, pp. 79-80.
- 55 Cliff, *Lenin*, p. 80.
- 56 Since Tony Cliff has brought Antonio Gramsci into the discussion, let us look at Gramsci’s ideas on this subject a little more closely. In the passages from his *Prison Notebooks* cited by Cliff, Gramsci does indeed say that “in the ‘most spontaneous’ movement it is simply the case that the elements of ‘conscious leadership’ cannot be checked, have left no reliable document”. Why is this? Because “they have not yet achieved any consciousness of the class ‘for itself ...” That is, they have not come to full self-consciousness, consciousness of their own class’s actual needs and general position in society. Gramsci continues, “hence, in such movements there exist *multiple* elements of ‘conscious leadership’, but no one of them is predominant or transcends the level of a given social stratum’s ‘popular science’ — its ‘*common sense*’ or *traditional* conception of the world”. In other words, the fact that there is no such thing as an absolute lack of consciousness does not mean that the people involved have come anywhere near true class consciousness. The consciousness to which they do subscribe may just as easily be contradictory and steeped in prejudices indicating backwardness and intellectual slavery to “traditional” conceptions. Those who seize upon this kind of consciousness in order to glorify it Gramsci compares to those historians who discover “consciously” worked-out theories based on folklore, witchcraft, and alchemy among the popular masses in order to “advocate its preservation” in order “that science may be put back onto a course more fertile in discoveries, etc.” Obviously, Gramsci’s discussion about popular forms of confused and backward consciousness was intended (in Gramsci’s own words, once again) not to confuse such consciousness with real self-

consciousness but rather to motivate “the need to study and develop the elements of popular psychology, historically and sociologically, actively (i.e., in order to *transform* them, by *educating* them, into a *modern* mentality) ...” Keeping in mind that Gramsci was writing in Aesopian language in order to evade the prison censor, it is clear that Gramsci is only paraphrasing his mentor, Lenin. It was, after all, Lenin who insisted (in *What Is To Be Done?*) that “the ‘spontaneous element’, in essence, represents nothing more nor less than consciousness in an embryonic form”, that “the instinctive is the unconscious (the spontaneous) to the aid of which socialists must come”. (Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 5, pp. 374, 388. See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* [International Publishers: New York, 1973], pp. 196-197. Emphasis added.)

57 Cliff, *Lenin*, pp. 80-81.

58 Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 4, p. 318. Original emphasis.

59 *Ibid.*, p. 318. Emphasis added.

60 *Ibid.*, p. 319. Emphasis added.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 310.

62 Cliff, *Lenin*, p. 81. Final emphasis added.

63 Trotsky, *My Life*, pp. 181-182.

64 Cliff, *Lenin*, p. 110.

65 Israel Getzler, *Martov: A Political Biography of a Russian Social-Democrat* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1967), pp 41, 50.

66 *Ibid.*, pp. 68-71, 78. See also Samuel Baron, *Plekhanov: The Father of Russian Marxism* (Stanford University Press: Stanford, 1966), p. 240.

67 Cliff, *Lenin*, pp. 176, 182.

68 Karl Kautsky, *The Class Struggle* (Erfurt Program) (Norton: New York, 1971), p. 191.

69 Trotsky, “Our Differences” (1924), in Trotsky, *Challenge of the Left Opposition (1923-25)* (Pathfinder Press: New York, 1975), p. 263.

70 One prominent subscriber to this “absurd proposition” was Leon Trotsky. Indeed, he defended this proposition most vigorously in the teeth of the ultimately successful campaign to dilute the political strength of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) by throwing its doors wide open during the so-called “Lenin levy”. The “Lenin levy”, declared in 1924 by Stalin, Zinoviev, and Kamenev, was an attack on the “high political level” of the RCP and was designed to provide the growing state and party bureaucracy with a backward, unquestioning party membership over which it could easily elevate itself. It was a classic bonapartist manoeuvre. In 1931 Trotsky wrote on this subject: “The fundamental crime of the centrist bureaucracy in the USSR is its false position regarding the party. The Stalin faction seeks to include administratively in the ranks of the party the whole working class. The party ceases to be the vanguard, that is, the voluntary selection of the most advanced,

the most conscious, the most devoted, and the most active workers. The party is fused with the class as it is and loses its power of resistance to the bureaucratic apparatus.” See *Leon Trotsky On the Trade Unions* (Merit: New York, 1969), p. 35. Stalin’s assault on what Hallas and Cliff regard as an “absurd proposition” was integrally bound up with the destruction of the Russian proletariat’s class dictatorship and the state-capitalist counterrevolution.

- 71 Hallas, *op. cit.*, p. 18. Original emphasis.
- 72 Getzler, *op. cit.*, p. 79. Quoted also in Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 7 (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1961), p. 261.
- 73 Quoted in Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 7, p. 275.
- 74 Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 6, p. 502.
- 75 See Cliff, *Lenin*, pp. 108-109.
- 76 Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 7, p. 262. Original emphasis.
- 77 *Ibid.*, p. 275. Original emphasis.
- 78 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 275.
- 79 *Ibid.*, p. 276. Original emphasis.
- 80 Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 6, p. 491.
- 81 Cliff, *Lenin*, p. 110.
- 82 Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 7, p. 260. Original emphasis.
- 83 Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 6, p. 502.
- 84 Quoted in Cliff, *Lenin*, p. 109.
- 85 Cliff, *Lenin*, pp. 92-93.
- 86 Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 7, pp. 273-274 (footnote).
- 87 Cliff, *Lenin*, p. 175. Emphasis added.
- 88 *Ibid.*, p. 176,
- 89 *Ibid.*, p. 176. Emphasis added.
- 90 *Ibid.*, pp. 172-73. The actual title of the work to which Cliff refers (not a pamphlet but a newspaper editorial) is “New Tasks and New Forces”.
- 91 *Ibid.*, pp. 177-78. Emphasis added.
- 92 Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 8 (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1962), p. 211.
- 93 *Ibid.*, p. 217.
- 94 Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 10 (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1962), p. 32. Emphasis added.
- 95 *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- 96 *Loc. cit.* Emphasis added.
- 97 *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- 98 Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 8, p. 217.
- 99 *Ibid.*, p. 212.

- 100 *Ibid.*, pp. 219-220.
- 101 Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 10, p. 32.
- 102 *Loc. cit.*
- 103 *Ibid.*, p. 34.
- 104 Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 8, pp 312-313.
- 105 Cliff, *Lenin*, p. 67.
- 106 Trotsky, "Our Differences", *op. cit.*, p. 266.

Appendix

- 1 Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 13, pp. 101-104.
- 2 Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 5, p. 464.
- 3 Quoted by Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 5, pp. 383-384.
- 4 Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 4, p. 257.
- 5 Engels, "Socialism in Germany", Marx & Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 27 (Lawrence and Wishart: London, 1990), pp. 237-238.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Lenin worked out his ideas on how workers can radicalise and come to embrace revolutionary socialist consciousness.

Tony Cliff, the historic founder of the British Socialist Workers Party (previously known as the International Socialists) put forward his analysis of Lenin's views on this topic in his 1975 book *Lenin: Building the Party*.

Bruce Landau subjects Cliff's treatment of the subject to a withering critique and in the process brings out clearly Lenin's real views on this question which lies at the very heart of the possibility of a socialist transformation of society.

Resistance books