

In Defense of Leninism

by Sharon Smith

It has been almost 80 years since the death of the Russian Revolutionary Vladimir Illich Lenin, and yet the controversy generated by his life's work—that is, the building of the revolutionary socialist party that led the Russian working class to power in the Russian Revolution of 1917—still rages over whether Lenin and his legacy are to be held up as a method for building a revolutionary movement or as a failure to be roundly condemned in order never to be repeated.

The scenario from Lenin's naysayers usually reads something like this: In 1917, Lenin and a tiny band of co-conspirators pulled off—not a massive, popular, social upheaval—but a military coup, and then proceeded to rule Russian society with an iron fist. The post-revolutionary period was, thus, not a flourishing of working-class democracy, but a totalitarian dictatorship. It is also assumed that the brutal dictator who ruled Russia from the late 1920s until his death in the 1950s, Joseph Stalin, simply inherited his position from Lenin—that Stalinism is a continuation of the Russian revolution, rather than a complete negation of everything that Lenin stood for. And, the argument concludes, this entire scenario owes its theoretical substance to none other than Karl Marx.

Lenin's harshest critics, of course, come from the ideological right wing, most of them masquerading as academics—out to prove one thing and one thing only: that Lenin was a brutal despot on the scale of a Hitler or Mussolini, a man whose insatiable desire for power was surpassed only by his thirst for blood. One such critic of high academic standing, Richard Pipes, the Baird Professor of History at Harvard University, put it this way in his book, *The Russian Revolution*:

The party that Lenin forged and led was really not a party in the customary sense of the word. It was more of an order in the sense in which Hitler called his National Socialist party, bound by the members unshakable loyalty to their leader and to one another, but subject to no other principle and responsible to no other constituency. Genuine political parties strive to enlarge their membership, whereas these "pseudo-parties"—the Bolshevik one first, and the fascist and the Nazi ones later—were exclusive.

These sorts of right-wing ideologues, who are the source of most of what passes for fact about Lenin and the Bolshevik Party, have actually produced a view of Lenin and Leninism that is pure fiction—and for a fairly straightforward reason, I would argue: to discourage people *here* from fighting back, because if the Bolshevik Party, the one example we have of a successful working-class revolutionary party, turns out to have been an authoritarian nightmare, then the only logical conclusion is that it just isn't worth trying to build a revolutionary party today.

And if the Russian Revolution, the one successful working-class revolution in world history was one which blew up in the faces of the workers who fought for it, then workers here shouldn't even consider trying to overthrow the profit system here. Workers should just resign themselves to the existence of capitalism, and they should just accept it when they lose their jobs or get their wages cut, or their health care or whatever—because the alternative is even worse.

I am just going to give one more example of the suspect quality of the academic literature that supposedly proves how authoritarian and bankrupt the Bolsheviks were—A Russian historian named Dmitry Volkogonov, who in a biography on Lenin's closest collaborator in the Russian Revolution of 1917, Leon Trotsky, wrote that Trotsky once confessed that he organized the Red Army through terror and repression. He even quotes Trotsky to support this assertion. He said that in Trotsky's autobiography *My Life*, Trotsky said, "It is impossible to or-

ganize an army without repression. It is necessary to put before the soldiers the choice of death in the front or the rear." Well, if you look at the actual quote in *My Life*, Trotsky did write those words—but the sentence doesn't end there. He finishes by saying, "That was the principle of the old armies, but we built an army on the principles of the October Revolution."

As absurd as some of these formulations are, the fact is that these sorts of accounts about Lenin and the Bolshevik Party make up most of what is accepted as the "truth"—the documentation—of the events of the Russian Revolution of 1917 and its immediate aftermath. And that this is what makes up the basis of what most people believe about Leninism—including many people who are part of the left, who want to see workers have more power in society, who want to change the world for the better—some of these same people accept much of the official mainstream criticism of Leninism. In fact, many people on the left who wouldn't agree with a single other thing that these right-wing academics have to say nevertheless share their assessment of the Bolshevik Party.

That is why within the left the word Leninism is so often equated with a lack of internal—and therefore external—democracy, and that it is so often assumed that the very idea of organizing a revolutionary socialist party around a set of principles is inherently elitist, and that that set of principles is often so disparagingly referred to as the mindless carrying of a "party line" by the membership.

It is quite easy to list a string of quotes from Lenin to back up the basic viewpoint that the Bolshevik Party was based upon elitism first and secrecy and authoritarianism second. I'll give you a couple of the most famous ones. In 1903, in one of his earliest debates on the nature of the revolutionary party, "What is to be done?," Lenin wrote: "The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively of 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 labor laws, etc." And elsewhere in the same debate he stated fairly explicitly, "Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers only from without, that is only from outside the economic struggle, from outside the relations between workers and employers."

Not only, presumably did Lenin hold the elitist idea that only intellectuals could convince workers of the need for revolution, but Lenin also said elsewhere of the revolutionary party, "such an organization must consist chiefly of people professionally engaged in revolutionary activity; that in an autocratic state, the more we confine the membership of such an organization to people who are professionally engaged in revolutionary activity and who have been professionally trained in the art of combating the political police, the more difficult will it be to unearth the organization."

And Lenin spelled out concretely what it meant to be a local member for the Bolshevik Party around the same time, in his "Letter to a comrade about our Organizational Tasks:" "every member of the factory committee should regard himself as an agent of the committee, obliged to submit to all its orders and to observe all the laws and customs of the 'army in the field' which he has joined and from which in time of war he has no right to absent himself without official leave."

Around quotations such as these, Lenin's critics paint the picture of Lenin as authoritarian, and Leninism as elitism. But again, it's what they leave out that matters. Because it is equally easy to present a series of quotes that paint an entirely different picture of Lenin and Leninism. Take for example, the statement Lenin made at the beginning of

the 1905 revolution in Russia, which flies in the face of everything you just heard from Lenin, from the strategy for party-building from “What is to be Done:” *“The working-class is instinctively, spontaneously Social Democratic, or socialist.”* A few years later, Lenin developed this idea further, when he said of workers: *“The very conditions of their lives makes the workers capable of struggle and impels them to struggle. At every step they come face to face with their enemy—the capitalist class. In combat with this enemy the worker becomes a socialist, comes to realize the necessity of a complete abolition of all poverty and all oppression.”*

And, as for intellectuals, far from idolizing them, he argued, *“A tight hold must always be kept on the intelligencia. It is always the instigator of all sorts of squabbles. One cannot rely on a small periphery of intellectuals, but one can and should rely on hundreds of organized workers.”* And as far as the internal party regime, Lenin argued to open up the gates of the party and welcome in new members by the thousands: *“The youth—the students and still more so the young workers—will decide the issue of the whole struggle. Form hundreds of circles from among the youth and encourage them to work at full blast. Allow every subcommittee to write and publish leaflets without any red tape—there is no harm if they do make a mistake; we will gently correct them.”* And he added to this view elsewhere, when he said, *“We must learn to form looser, broader and more accessible organizations. Our slogan is: for a larger Social Democratic Labor Party!”*

Most of Lenin’s critics conveniently leave out this side of Lenin, when he expounds at great length on building a broad, mass-based activist party, so that we are left only with the grim and determined strategies laid out in “What is to be Done.” Nevertheless, having seen the two sides of Lenin, it is reasonable to ask how these two different sides of Lenin—these two seemingly completely contradictory viewpoints on the nature of the revolutionary party—can be reconciled, both coming from the same person.

These *are* the two sides of Leninism—the necessarily different strategies and tactics, but always with the same aim: preparing for the coming revolution, by building a mass revolutionary workers party over a period of years in advance of a revolutionary upheaval—even when such a revolution seems way off in the distant future. These different strategies were dictated not by Lenin, but by the political conditions which existed in Russia at any given time. On the one hand, of necessity, in the highly repressive conditions that at most times existed in tsarist Russia, the party had to operate in secret and be organized as a tightly disciplined network. But entirely different methods were used to build the party in the middle of social upheaval—such as occurred in Russia in 1905 with the first Russian Revolution and then again in 1917, when the second Russian Revolution broke out that brought the working class to victory.

A couple of facts can illustrate just how repressive Tsarist Russia was before and in between the two Russian revolutions—between the defeat of the 1905 revolution and the years immediately preceding of the 1917 revolution—a period in which any and all opposition was crushed, and in which joining a revolutionary party was a virtual guarantee that you would end up in prison, or in exile in Siberia sometimes over and over again. In 1898, when the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party held its founding convention, virtually every delegate to the convention was arrested by the police. As far as infiltration by the police, every party committee during certain periods had police agents among its members—in 1910, every Moscow committee was headed by a police agent; in 1912, two police agents sat on the editorial board of *Pravda*, the party’s main newspaper, and one police agent sat on its central committee.

The way Lenin himself described the need to restrict the party in this period was quite simply, that *“making the party accessible to the masses”* meant *making “revolutionaries accessible to the police.”* Open democracy, as we think of it, was completely impossible if the party was to survive.

But as soon as the 1905 revolution broke out and masses of work-

ers began moving into struggle, Lenin argued for a complete about-face in the methods of building the party, for a wide open and democratic organization: he said quite clearly: *“Now the open propaganda of democratic ideas and demands, no longer persecuted by the weakened government, has spread so widely that we must learn to adjust ourselves to this entirely new scope of the movement.”* And he said, specifically, *“The whole party organization is now built on a democratic basis. This means that ALL the party members must take part in the election of officials, committee members and so forth and that ALL party members discuss and decide questions concerning the political campaigns of the proletariat, and that all party members determine the line of tactics of the party organizations.”*

Far from being the brutal tyrant that he is so often purported to have been, Lenin stood above all for freedom and democracy—and whenever external conditions permitted it, these were the operating methods of the Bolshevik Party. In fact, the idea that Lenin ruled the party with an iron fist at any point in its history is downright laughable. He repeatedly argued that the leadership should not bark out orders to the membership but that they should *“patiently explain”* policies and aim to convince them over time of the politics.

Repeatedly during the course of building the Bolshevik party over two decades, Lenin found himself outvoted and in a minority, shouted down and heckled at meetings, and denounced by fellow party members. This is all part of the public record. Yet Lenin’s critics, when they hear that the Bolsheviks operated on the basis of “democratic centralism,” hear only the word centralism. But the fact is that the party was far more democratic than it was centralized.

Nowhere was this more in evidence than during 1917. In fact, when Lenin started to argue for a working-class insurrection at the beginning of September 1917, when the Bolsheviks first won a majority in the *soviets*, (the Russian word for the workers councils that sprung up all over Russia in the Revolution) it took him no less than a month and a half, until mid-October, to convince a majority of the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party that it was time to make this proposal to the soviet. And even then, two members of the central committee voted against. And even after the Central Committee voted that it was time to organize an insurrection, the Bolsheviks did not take power themselves, they made a proposal to the Soviet that *it* should take power, by organizing a military revolutionary committee (this was immediately voted for in the soviet).

And one of the central committee members, Kamenev, actually leaked the information to the local media that the Bolsheviks had voted for an insurrection, so the plan for the insurrection appeared in the daily newspaper days before it took place. This is hardly the picture of the secret military coup that Lenin is supposed to have single-handedly masterminded and carried out in October of 1917—but an open and inclusive debate within the party and within the working class organizations.

It is in the evidence—and there is plenty of it—from 1917, that the fictional character of Lenin painted by the right-wing ideologues falls flat on its face. To begin with, the Bolsheviks had absolutely nothing to do with the demonstrations that began the revolution in February of 1917. Not only that, but they actually urged the women workers who were planning to demonstrate on International Women’s Day to calm down! (It should be noted that, while the Bolshevik party was taken by surprise by the start of the February Revolution, the local Bolsheviks quickly shifted and began taking part in the strike wave.)

Nevertheless, this rather embarrassing episode shows quite clearly that the revolution of 1917 was hardly a creation of the Bolshevik Party—it would have happened with or without it. But it succeeded, I would argue, **because of it.** Even though most people viewed the February revolution that overthrew the tsar as the end of the revolution—the Bolshevik Party alone argued that this was just the beginning, that a second revolution had to take place that would transfer *“all power to the soviets.”* This was the Bolshevik Party slogan—and it became the

slogan of the October revolution when it happened.

This example illustrates that the relationship between the Leninist party and the working class is by no means a one-way relationship—the party learned as much from the workers as it taught them. And Lenin stressed this repeatedly; the party was pushed forward as much by the workers movement as it pushed the movement forward. Throughout 1917, there are many examples in which the party was wrong on this or that issue, or moved too slowly, or tried to move too quickly. But the crucial factor was that the party had, over a very long period of time, learned how to lead—not by fiat, not by substituting itself for the working class, but by organizing the most class conscious workers into a political party as a way to help raise the consciousness of the working-class as a whole. Lenin was adamant about this relationship, stating, “*There must not be a hint of dictatorship of the Bolsheviks.*”

There is no question that the Bolshevik Party could have seized power in June or July of 1917. In Petrograd, in Kronstadt, and a number of other areas, throngs of workers were calling for an insurrection. But in June or July the Bolsheviks were still a minority in the elections to the soviets in the most of Russia. To have organized a seizure of power at that point would have meant organizing it in the name of the minority.

It was only after September, when the Bolsheviks won a majority in soviet after soviet, and Trotsky was elected president of the Petrograd soviet, that Lenin began to argue for an insurrection—that is, when the insurrection would be the act of the working-class *majority*. The fact that it was the act of the working-class majority is the reason why in Petrograd, certainly, the insurrection itself was virtually bloodless (more people were killed in the making of Eisenstein’s film about the Russian Revolution several years later than were killed in the Petrograd insurrection itself). Between the time of the February Revolution and the insurrection some seven months later, the size of the Bolshevik Party had multiplied by more than 20 times—from 20,000 to nearly a quarter of a million members. There can be no question that the Bolsheviks represented the will of the majority of workers in Russia in 1917.

And there is no doubt that power was transferred in 1917 not to the Bolshevik Party but to the soviets themselves. Nor were the soviets or workers councils a creation of any Leninist—or Marxist for that matter. They sprung up first in the revolution of 1905 and then again, spontaneously in February 1917. And they operated on a democratic basis that is unknown in capitalist society. Unlike Congress or parliamentary democracy, or the constituent assembly that existed in Russia at the time—which call themselves democratic but actually work to exclude working-class people from real power in society—workers councils do the opposite: they give every single working-class person real representation in government. The eyewitness to the Russian revolution, American journalist John Reed (who wrote *Ten Days that Shook the World*, a book that has turned thousands of people into socialists) described the workers’ councils this way, after seeing them in action: “*no political body more sensitive and responsive to the popular will was ever invented.*” And he went on to describe how, even though most delegates to the soviets were elected by workers in factories, “*the soviet system is extremely flexible, and if the cooks and waiters or the street sweepers or the cab drivers of that ward organized and demanded representation, they were allowed.*” Any segment of the population that felt it was being discriminated against could make up an independent soviet.

The whole way the soviets were run guaranteed democracy because—again, unlike Congress, where you either have to be a millionaire yourself or be backed by millionaires to get elected—no delegate to the workers council was allowed to earn more than the average workers’ wage. And most importantly, the workers councils operated by the principle of “immediate recall.” Unlike here, where you have to wait four or six years until the next election when a politician breaks his or her promises—in the soviets, delegates were not elected for any

set period of time and could be removed within hours if the workers who elected them decided it was time for a change.

And actually, its worth mentioning that workers councils were not something that was exclusive to the Russian Revolution—they have arisen in every single situation in which the workers movement becomes powerful enough to challenge the government—all over the world. Workers councils have sprung up everywhere from Italy, Hungary and Germany in the late 19-teens and early 1920s, to Portugal in 1974 and Iran in 1979. Above all, Leninism is about winning the rule of the workers’ councils, not the revolutionary party. It is about making Karl Marx’s argument, that socialism is the self-emancipation of the working-class, a reality—it is about workers and the oppressed freeing themselves from exploitation and oppression.

This is an important distinction, and one that, not surprisingly, eludes the official historians who consider the soviets yet another form of the Bolsheviks despotic rule—forgetting completely that the soviets were multi-party institutions.

The first months, in particular, of post-revolutionary Russia show that, when workers are given the opportunity to rule themselves, to raise their own intellect, they jump on the opportunity. There are endless accounts—usually very surprised accounts—by foreign visitors to post-revolutionary Russia: of workers and peasants crowded into the opera houses and theaters; of large meeting halls packed with workers and peasants stuffed like sardines, discussing the issues of the day; of workers who could barely read poring over issues of socialist newspapers. All this in a country where the majority of the population was still illiterate.

If anything (and again, this flies in the face of the so-called official historians yet has been documented repeatedly in the records of the Russian revolution) post revolutionary Russia was the flourishing of workers’ control from below. Just a few examples help to illustrate just how little the party was in control of the situation. In 1918, for example, when the Bolsheviks negotiated the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, which finally pulled Russia out of the first world War, the regional soviet of Siberia refused to accept the treaty—even though it had been ratified by the central soviet, the body representing the soviets nationally. Nevertheless the Siberian soviet refused to accept the treaty and announced it was still in a state of war against the Central Powers.

This spirit of independence existed not only in the soviets, but in workplaces and communities throughout Russia. On the railways, for example, each station operated as a sort of independent republic, with the stationmaster elected by all the workers in the station. In factories, the factory committees run by the workers often refused to pay any attention to instructions they received even locally, and proceeded to make their own decisions about work and production—and usually awarded themselves large pay increases. Krupskaya, Lenin’s wife, recalled in her reminiscences how she was at the commissariat of education one day and a working woman came in: “*During our conversation, I asked her what shift she was working in. I thought she was working the night shift. Otherwise she would not have been able to come to the Comisariat in the daytime. None of us are working today. We had a meeting yesterday evening, everyone was behind with her domestic work at home, so we voted to knock off today. We’re the bosses now, you know.*” And Lenin’s wife comments: “*For early 1918, this was the typical case.*”

The historian Marcel Liebman described: “*Local committees sprang up everywhere: workers’ committees, peasant committees, housewives committees, committees for factories and quarters, committees of soldiers cossacks and sailors. In the industrial quarters, in the big blocks crowded with working-class families, there were house committees that tried to regulate the details of communal life. Jules Destree, a Belgian socialist who was in Russia, tells how, while travelling from Petrograd to Moscow by a very slow train, the people sharing his compartment had formed a “travelling committee” before they reached their destination.*” School students organized at their schools and got rid of mandatory examinations, and elected their teachers. The list went on and on and on.

It is very important to understand that, not only was Lenin in favor of this kind of control from below—he went to great lengths to encourage it. On the eve of insurrection, he wrote in *State and Revolution*: “The mass of the population will rise to take an independent part, not only in voting and elections, but also in the everyday administration of the state.” Then, addressing the soviet immediately after the insurrection: “We must allow complete freedom to the creative faculties of the masses.” And a few weeks later, On November 6th, Lenin wrote in *Pravda*, “Comrades, working people! Remember that now you yourselves are at the helm of state. No one will help you if you yourselves do not unite and take into your hands all affairs of state... Get on with the job yourselves: begin right at the bottom, do not wait for anyone.”

Two months after the insurrection, Lenin urged working-class people to go still further. At the end of December 1917, Lenin wrote: “one of the most important tasks of today... is to develop the independent initiative of the workers, and of all the working and exploited people generally, develop it as widely as possible in creative organizational work. At all costs, we must break the old absurd, savage, despicable, and disgusting prejudice that only the so-called ‘upper classes,’ only the rich, are capable of administering the state and directing the organizational development of socialist society.”

This is the vision of socialism represented by Lenin and Leninist organization—one in which ordinary people take the running of society into their own hands. And his vision represented not only an end to exploitation of the working class but an end to all forms of oppression. For example, even though the revolution implemented enormous advances for women—including the right to vote and run for public office well before women had won this right in the so-called advanced countries (including this one) and granted women in Russia the right to abortion decades before it was won in the West—Lenin expounded at great length that much more needed to be done to wipe out women’s oppression: “Notwithstanding all the laws emancipating women, she continues to be a domestic slave, because petty housework rushes, strangles, stultifies and degrades her, chains her to the kitchen and the nursery... The real emanipation fo women, real communism, will begin only when and where an all-out struggle begins against this petty housekeeping, or rather when its wholesale transformation into a large-scale socialist economy begins.” And he called for more public catering establishments, nurseries and kindergartens to help free women up from household labor.

Lenin was just as dedicated to wiping out racial and national oppression. On the question of Jews (against whom discrimination and violence was about on the same scale at it is against Black people in the United States) the Bolshevik Party had long before the revolution made the ending of Jewish oppression a central feature of its program. In 1914, Lenin emphasized this issue: Workers “must present their conviction of the necessity for complete equality, for complete and final renunciation of any special privileges for any particular nation... The [ruling class] try to make Jewish people a scapegoat for all their sins. The Bolshevik Party have therefore rightly given first place in their bill to the position of the Jews”.

Not only did the Russian revolution outlaw discrimination against Jews but all three of the main soviets voted in Jews as their presidents—which is about as significant as it would be to elect a Black president in the United States today. When Trotsky described the Russian revolution as a “festival of the oppressed,” he was not exaggerating.

But this side of Leninism usually gets ignored—this vision of socialism, the reality of post-revolutionary Russia in its first months—before it was invaded by the armies of 14 countries, including this one, to try and overthrow the new workers’ government; before the economic blockade against against Russia (on par with today’s sanctions against Iraq) that caused mass famine and epidemics throughout Russia). in other words, before the revolution was starved and the economy devastated by the Civil War—the counter-revolutionary war that

set into motion forces that would eventually unravel the revolution, despite the heroic efforts of the Bolsheviks to save it.

Instead, when discussing post-Revolutionary Russia, the naysayers focus on a series of charges—all of them leveled against the Bolsheviks as if they were operating in a period of peace and prosperity, rather than a situation in which an active counter revolutionary military mobilization was trying to restore power to the tsar and the old Russian capitalist class. The Bolsheviks are criticized for dispersing the constituent assembly (the parliamentary body that was about as representative of working-class people as the U.S. Congress is today) as an attack on democracy, without acknowledging that the constituent assembly was raised as the rallying cry of the counter-revolution—not because they believed in democracy of any kind, but only to undermine the soviets.

Similarly, the Bolsheviks are charged with outlawing political parties such as the Socialist Revolutionaries and, on and off again, the Mensheviks, after mid-1918—without acknowledging that these were outlawed because they were actively supporting the counter-revolution. The Socialist Revolutionaries (who were neither, just for the record) stood formally in favor of returning to a monarchy and went so far as to try and assassinate Lenin. He almost died after the second attempt on his life—a fact conveniently missing from most of the official histories on this question.

And finally, and perhaps most importantly, at the end of two and a half years of civil war—which the Red Army won only because of the dedication of the mass of Russian workers to defending the revolution—the Bolsheviks are charged with putting down a series of rebellions in the winter of 1921, in particular the Kronstadt rebellion in March of 1921. This charge is leveled against the Bolsheviks without the slightest regard for the context in which these rebellions took place. Mass famine was sweeping the country (some 7 million Russians died of starvation and diseases like typhus during this period); industry was ground to a standstill because of the war and the blockade; and counter-revolutionary armies (like the Polish army) were camped right outside Russia’s borders, waiting to seize on these rebellions as an excuse to invade Russia once again. This is the context in which the Bolsheviks made the tortured decision to crush the Kronstadt rebellion.

Marx had said that people make their own history, but not in conditions of their own choosing. And you could not have picked more difficult conditions than what existed in Russia in 1921. Russia was already a poor country before the revolution, and Lenin understood full well that a workers government in Russia could not survive for very long without a revolution elsewhere to support it. Lenin himself said repeatedly, “Without a revolution in Germany, we are doomed.”

And there was a revolution in Germany—there were three revolutions in Germany in fact, between 1918 and 1923. It was only then, after the final defeat of the German revolution in 1923, that the hopes for support from abroad were finally crushed. In 1921, the future was not at all clear, and the Bolsheviks made the enormously difficult choice to try and hold out—a choice that was made the easier because the defeat of the Russian Revolution in that context would have meant a return to the rule of tsarism. The counter-revolutionaries staging anti-Semitic riots against Jews throughout Russia were a constant reminder of what a return to tsarism would mean.

And there the naysayers case is complete—including the claim that the crushing of the Kronstadt rebellion constituted the beginnings of Stalinism in Russia—without acknowledging that both Lenin until his death in 1924 and Trotsky throughout the 1920s, fought tooth and nail against the bureaucratic rule that Stalin was in the process of building.

The Russian Revolution did not survive, that is true. But the tragedy is that, 80 years later, instead of honoring it for giving us in later generations the one glimpse we have of what a workers’ revolution might look like—of the tremendous possibilities for a socialist so-

ciety in the future for the world—even many people on the left accept the official histories of these right-wing ideologues and lay the blame for its failure on the Bolshevik Party and on Lenin in particular. Yet the very essence of socialism is to share the wealth—not the poverty—in society. If anyone is to blame for the defeat of the Russian Revolution, it is the capitalists whose armies invaded and blockaded revolutionary Russia, reducing its economy on a scale that was “unprecedented in human history,” according to one economist. All the Bolsheviks were ever allowed to share was the poverty. The revolution was never able to operate in anything other than conditions of terrible scarcity. Instead of viewing the Russian Revolution as a proof of what’s wrong with Leninism, it makes far more sense to appreciate the tremendous accomplishments of the Russian revolution despite the tremendous drawbacks of the situation.

Nevertheless, many people on the left who embrace the ideals of workers control and an end to oppression—the things that for a brief period were a product of the revolution—do not at the same time embrace the need for a revolutionary party. It is fairly common even to hear people describe, “I’m a Marxist, but not a Leninist.” But there is an inherent contradiction in that point of view. Building a revolutionary party is the only way to make a reality of the self-emancipation of the working class. There has not ever been, and I would argue, there will never be, a single instance when a ruling class faced with a mass strike of workers and the emergence of workers councils suddenly develops a guilty conscience and hands over power. The reality is that they use every means at their disposal—and they have many—against every gain made by workers. It is saying, “I believe in the self-emancipation of the working-class, but not for the main vehicle for winning it.”

Without the Bolshevik Party, there would have been no workers control in Russia in 1917, no emancipation of women, no liberation of the oppressed nationalities—because there would have been no Russian Revolution. The fact that the Bolsheviks had slogged it out over many years—through the ups and downs, making mistakes and learning from them—meant that they could transform themselves from what one Bolshevik called a “despised minority” isolated from the mass of workers, to become the party that would win the support of the majority of Russian workers and the peasantry in 1917. You can’t have the Lenin of *State and Revolution* without the Lenin of “What is to be Done”—one would not exist without the other. History is filled with heroic struggles of workers and the oppressed rising up against their oppression, only to be crushed because they had no revolutionary party, or a party that was too new and inexperienced to be able to lead the movement to victory—the German Revolution was one such bloody defeat.

We are Leninists because we want to see the victory of the working class and the victory of a future socialist society.