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Lenin In England

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A new era in the class struggle is beginning. The workers have imposed it on the capitalists, through the violent reality of their organised strength in the factories. Capital’s power appears to be stable and solid. ... the balance of forces appears to be weighted against the workers... and yet precisely at the points where capital’s power appears most dominant, we see how deeply it is penetrated by this menace, this threat of the working class.

It is easy *not* to see it. We shall need to study, to look long and hard at the class situation of the working class. Capitalist society has its laws of development: economists have invented them, governments have imposed them, and workers have suffered them. But who will uncover the laws of development of the working class? Capital has its history, and its historians write it — but who is going to write the history of the working class? Capitalist exploitation can impose its political domination through a hundred and one different forms — but how are we going to sort out the form that will be taken by the future dictatorship of the workers organised as the ruling class? This is explosive material; it is intensely social; we must live it, work from within it, and work patiently.

We too have worked with a concept that puts capitalist development first, and workers second. This is a mistake. And now we have to turn the problem on its head, reverse the polarity, and start again from the beginning: and the beginning is the class struggle of the working class. At the level of socially developed capital, capitalist development becomes subordinated to working class struggles; it follows behind them, and they set the pace to which the political mechanisms of capital’s own reproduction must be tuned.

This is not a rhetorical proposition. Nor is it intended just to restore our confidence. Of course, we urgently need to shake off that sense of working class defeat which has for decades dragged down this movement which, in its origins, was the only revolutionary movement of this era. But an urgent practical need is never sufficient basis for a scientific thesis: such a thesis must stand on its own feet, on a solid and complex grounding of material, historical fact. At that point, our case will be proven: in June 1848 (that fateful month, a thousand times cursed by the bourgeoisie), and possibly even earlier, the working class took over the stage, and they have never left it since. In different periods they have voluntarily taken on different roles — as actors, as prompters, as technicians or stage-hands — whilst all the time waiting to wade into the theatre and attack the audience. So how does the working class present itself today, on the contemporary stage?

Our new approach starts from the proposition that, at both national and international level, it is the specific, present, political situation of the working class that both necessitates and

directs the given forms of capital's development. From this beginning we must now move forward to a new understanding of the entire world network of social relations.

For instance take the basic material feature of this network — the fact that the world market has been undergoing reconstruction — a process which we can trace back to the ending of Stalinism's stranglehold over development. It would be easy to explain this in terms that are economic, addressing ourselves to "the problem of markets in capitalist production." But the *working class viewpoint* seeks to find a political explanation. The meaning of a unified world market *today* is that it brings an *international* level of control of social labour power. It is possible -albeit difficult — to organise commodity production within a limited free-trade zone. But not so the movements of the working class. Historically, right at its origins, workers' labour power was already homogeneous at the international level, and — in the course of a long historical period — it has forced capital to become equally homogeneous. And today it is precisely the *unity of movement* of the working class at the world level which forces capital rapidly to salvage a unified response.

But when we say that there is a unity in the movements of the international working class — how are we to grasp it? The various institutional levels of the official labour movement only create *divisions* in everything; the structures of capitalism unify everything — but only in capital's interests. An act of political struggle can't be simply tested and measured by empirical means. The only way to prove this unity is to start organising it. Then we shall discover that the new forms of class unity is wholly implicit in the new forms of working class struggle, and that the field of this struggle is *social capital at an international level*.

At this level, the political situation of the working class has never been so clear: wherever in history we find concentrated the social mass of an industrial labour force, we can see at a glance the same collective attitudes, the same basic practices, and the same unified political growth. Planned non-cooperation, organised passivity, polemical expectations, a political refusal, and a permanent continuity of struggles — these are the specific historical forms in which working class struggle today is generalising and developing itself. They are transitory forms of a transitory situation, in which, in social terms, the workers have already gone beyond the old organisations, but have not yet reached a new organisation a vacuum of political organisation, be it reformist or revolutionary. We have reached a period of in-between in working class history: we must examine it deeply and grasp its implications, for its political consequences will be decisive.

The first consequence is, not surprisingly, a difficulty: how are we to grasp the material movements of the class, in the absence of levels of institutions corresponding to those movements — i.e. the lack of those channels through which class consciousness usually expresses itself? This clearly demands a greater theoretical effort (and one more capable of making abstractions), but it also has a clearer practical function: for we are compelled to analyse the working class independently of the working class movement.

The second consequence is that we find contradictions and seeming uncertainties in the movements of the class. It is clear that if the working class had a revolutionary political organisation, it would aim everywhere, at making use of the highest developed point of capitalist reformism. The process of building a unification of capital at the international level can only become the material base for a political recomposition of the working class (and in this sense a positive strategic moment for the revolution) if it is accompanied by a revolutionary growth not only of the class, but also of class organisation. If this element is

absent, the whole process works to the advantage of capital, as a tactical moment of a one-sided stabilisation of the system, seemingly integrating the working class within the system.

The historical workings of Italian capitalism — i.e. the organic political accord between Catholics and Socialists — could perhaps reopen a revolutionary process along classical lines, if it again managed to provide Italian workers with a working class party which would be committed to direct opposition to the capitalist system in the democratic phase of capital's class dictatorship. Without this, the dominance of capitalist exploitation will, for the time being, become more stable, and the workers will be forced to seek other paths towards their revolution. Whilst it is true that the working class objectively forces capital into clear, precise choices, it is also true that capital then makes these choices work against the working class. Capital, at this moment, is better organised than the working class: the choices that the working class imposes on capital run the risk of giving strength to capital. This gives the working class an *immediate interest* in opposing these choices.

Today the strategic viewpoint of the working class is so clear that we wonder whether it is only now coming to the full richness of its maturity. It has discovered (or rediscovered) the true secret, which will be the death sentence on its class enemy: the political ability to force capital into reformism, and then to blatantly make use of that reformism for the working class revolution. But the present tactical position of the working class — as a class without class organisation — is, and must necessarily be, less clear and more subtly ambiguous. The working class is still forced to make use of contradictions which create crisis within capitalist reformism; it has to play up the elements which hinder and retard capitalist development, since it knows and senses that to allow a free hand for capital's reformist operations in the absence of a political organisation of the working class, would amount to freezing for a long period the entire revolutionary process (and, by the same token, if such an organisation *did* exist, it would open this process immediately). Thus the two reformisms — that of capital and that of the labour movement — should certainly meet, but only through a direct initiative by the working class. When — as at the present moment — all the initiative is in capital's hands, the workers' immediate interest is to keep them apart. From a tactical point of view, too, it is correct that this meeting should take place once the working class has experienced not only struggle, but also revolutionary struggle, and within revolutionary struggle has also experienced alternative models of organisation. At that point, the historic encounter of capitalist reformism with the reformism of the labour movement will really mark the beginning of the revolutionary process. But our present situation is different: it precedes and paves the way for that later stage. From this follows both the workers strategic support for capital's development in *general* and their tactical opposition to the particular forms of that development. So, in the working class today there is a contradiction between tactics and strategy.

In other words, the political moment of *tactics* and the theoretical moment of *strategy* are in contradiction, in a complex and very much mediated relationship between revolutionary organisation and working class science. Today, at the theoretical level, the workers viewpoint must be unrestricted, it must not limit itself, it must leap (forward by transcending and negating all the empirical evidence which the intellectual cowardice of the petty-bourgeois is forever demanding. For working class thought, the moment of discovery has returned. The days of systems building, of repetition, and vulgarity elevated to the status of systematic discourse are definitely over. What is needed now is to start again, with rigorously one-sided class logic — courage and determination for ourselves, and detached irony towards the rest.

This is not to be confused with the creation of a political programme; we must resist the temptation to carry this theoretical outlook immediately into the arena of the political struggle — a struggle which is articulated on the basis of a precise content, which, in some cases, may even contradict (quite correctly) our theoretical statements. As regards the practical resolution of practical problems of direct struggles, of direct organisation³ of direct intervention in a given class situation where workers are involved — all these should be gauged first of all by what the movement needs for its own development. Only secondarily should they be judged from the viewpoint of a general perspective which subjectively imposes these things on the class enemy.

But the separation of theory and politics is only the consequence of the contradiction between tactics and strategy. Both have their material base in the process (still slowly developing) by which the class and the historical organisations of the class — the “working class” and the “labour movement” — first become divided, and then come to counterpose each other. What does this mean concretely, and where will it lead us? The first thing to say is that the goal, the aim of this approach is the solid recomposition of a politically correct relationship between the two moments. No separation between them can be theoretically justified, and no counterposition can be effected at any point, not even provisionally. If a part of the labour movement finds again the path to revolution as signalled by the working class, then the process of unification of these moments will be easier, quicker, more direct and more secure. Otherwise, the revolutionary process, although nonetheless assured, will be less clear, less decisive, longer and more full of drama. It is easy to see the job of mystification that the old organisations are doing on the new working class struggles. But it is harder to grasp the way that workers are continuously, consciously making use of that institution which capital still believes to be the movement of the organised workers.

In particular, the working class has left in the hands of the traditional organisations all the problems of tactics, while maintaining for itself an autonomous strategic perspective free from restriction and compromises. And again we have the temporary outcome, of a revolutionary strategy and reformist tactics. Even if, as often happens, the opposite *appears* to be the case. It appears that workers are now in accord with the system, and only occasionally come into friction with it: but this is the “bourgeois” appearance of capitalist social relations. The truth is that, politically speaking, even the unions’ skirmishes represent for the workers an academic exercise in their struggle for power: it is as such that they take them on, make use of them, and once they have been made use of, hand them back to the bosses. As a matter of fact, the classical Marxist thesis — that the Union holds the tactical moment, and the Party holds the strategic moment — still holds true for the workers. This is why, if a link still exists between the working class and the unions, it does not exist between the working class and the Party. It is this fact which frees the strategic perspective from the immediate organisational tasks; it splits, temporarily, class struggle and class organisation; it splits the ongoing moment of struggle and temporary forms of organisation — all of which is the consequence of the historical failure of Socialist reformism, as well as being a premise of the political development of the working class revolution.

Theoretical research and practical political work have to be dragged — violently if need be — into focusing on this question: not the development of capitalism, but the development of the revolution. We have no models. The history of past experiences serves only to free us of those experiences. We must entrust ourselves to a new kind of scientific interpretation. We know that the whole process of development is materially embodied in the new level of working class struggles. Our starting point might therefore be in uncovering certain forms of working

class struggles which set in motion a certain type of capitalist development which goes in the direction of the revolution. Then we would consider how to articulate these experiences within the working class, choosing subjectively the nerve points at which it is possible to strike at capitalist production. And on this basis, testing and re-testing, we could approach the problem of how to create a relationship, a new and ongoing organisation which could match these struggles. Then perhaps we would discover that “organisational miracles” are always happening, and have always been happening, within those miraculous struggles of the working class that nobody wants to know about but which perhaps, all by themselves, make and have made more revolutionary history than all the revolutions the colonised people have ever made.

But this practical work, articulated on the basis of the factory, and then made to function throughout the terrain of the social relations of production, this work needs to be continually judged and mediated by a political level which can generalise it. This is a new kind of political level, which requires us to look into and organise a new form of working class newspaper. This would not be designed to immediately report and reflect on all particular experiences of struggle; rather, its task would be to concentrate these experiences into a general political approach. In this sense, the newspaper would provide a monitoring of the strategic validity of particular instances of struggle. The formal procedure for carrying out such a verification would have -to be turned on its head. It is the political approach which must verify the correctness of the particular struggles, and not vice-versa. Because, on this basis, the political. Approach would be the total viewpoint of the working class, and therefore the actual real situation. And it is easy to see how such an approach takes us, away from the Leninist conception of the working class newspaper: this was conceived as the collective organiser on the basis of, or in anticipation of, a Bolshevik organisation of the class and of the Party. These are impossible objectives for us at this stage of the class struggle: this is the stage where we must embark on a discovery, not of the political organisation of advanced vanguards, but of the political organisation of the whole, compact social mass which the working class has become, in the period of its high political maturity — a class which, precisely because of these characteristics, is the only revolutionary force, a force which, proud and menacing, controls the present order of things.

We know it. And Lenin knew it before us. And before Lenin, Marx also discovered, in his own experience, how the hardest point is the transition to organisation. The continuity of the struggle is a simple matter: the workers only need themselves, and the bosses facing them. But continuity of organisation is a rare and complex thing: no sooner is organisation institutionalised into a form, than it is immediately used by capitalism (or by the labour movement on behalf of capitalism). This explains the fact that workers will very fast drop forms of organisation that they have only just won. And in place of the bureaucratic void of the general political organisation, they substitute the ongoing struggle at factory level — a struggle which takes ever-new forms which only the intellectual creativity of productive work can discover. Unless a directly *working class* political organisation can be generalised, the revolutionary process will not begin: workers know it, and this is why you will not find them in the chapels of the official parties singing hymns to the ‘democratic’ revolution. The reality of the working class is tied firmly to the name of Karl Marx, while the need of the working class for political organisation is tied equally firmly to the name of Lenin. With a masterly stroke, the Leninist strategy brought Marx to St Petersburg: only the working class viewpoint could have carried out such a bold revolutionary step. Now let us try to retrace the path, with the same scientific spirit of adventure and political discovery. What we call “Lenin in England” is a project to research a new Marxist practice of the working class party: it is the

theme of struggle and of organisation at the highest level of political development of the working class.