The Primitiveness of the Economists and the Organization of the Revolutionaries

Rabocheye Dyelo’s assertions, which we have analyzed, that the economic struggle is the most widely applicable means of political agitation and that our task now is to lend the economic struggle itself a political character, etc., express a narrow view, not only of our political, but also of our organizational tasks. The “economic struggle against the employers and the government” does not at all require an all-Russia centralized organization, and hence this struggle can never give rise to such an organization as will combine, in one general assault, all the manifestations of political opposition, protest, and indignation, an organization that will consist of professional revolutionaries and be led by the real political leaders of the entire people. This stands to reason. The character of any organization is naturally and inevitably determined by the content of its activity. Consequently, Rabocheye Dyelo, by the assertions analyzed above, sanctifies and legitimizes not only narrowness of political activity, but also of organizational work. In this case, Rabocheye Dyelo, as always, proves itself an organ whose consciousness yields to spontaneity. Yet subservience to spontaneously developing forms of organisation, failure to realise the narrowness and primitiveness of our organisational work, of our “handicraft” methods in this most important sphere, failure to realise this, I say, is a veritable ailment from which our movement suffers. It is not an ailment that comes with decline, but one, of course, that comes with growth. It is however at the present time, when the wave of spontaneous indignation, as it were, is sweeping over us, leaders and organisers of the movement, that an irreconcilable struggle must be waged against all defence of backwardness, against any legitimation of narrowness in this matter. It is particularly necessary to arouse in all who participate in practical work, or are preparing to take up that work, discontent with the amateurism prevailing among us and an unshakable determination to rid ourselves of it.

A. WHAT IS PRIMITIVENESS?

We shall try to answer this question by giving a brief description of the activity of a typical Social-Democratic study circle of the period 1894-1901. We have noted that the entire student
youth of the period was absorbed in Marxism. Of course, these students were not only, or even
not so much, interested in Marxism as a theory; they were interested in it as an answer to the
question, “What is to be done?”, as a call to take the field against the enemy. These new warriors
marched to battle with astonishingly primitive equipment and training. In a vast number of cases
they had almost no equipment and absolutely no training. They marched to war like peasants
from the plough, armed only with clubs. A students’ circle establishes contacts with workers and
sets to work, without any connection with the old members of the movement, without any
connection with study circles in other districts, or even in other parts of the same city (or in other
educational institutions), without any organisation of the various divisions of revolutionary work,
without any systematic plan of activity covering any length of time. The circle gradually expands
its propaganda and agitation; by its activities it wins the sympathies of fairly large sections of
workers and of a certain section of the educated strata, which provide it with money and from
among whom the “committee” recruits new groups of young people. The attractive power of the
committee (or League of Struggle) grows, its sphere of activity becomes wider, and the
committee expands this activity quite spontaneously; the very people who a year or a few months
previously spoke at the students’ circle gatherings and discussed the question, “Whither?”, who
established and maintained contacts with the workers and wrote and published leaflets, now,
establish contacts with other groups of revolutionaries, procure literature, set to work to publish a
local newspaper, begin to talk of organising a demonstration, and finally turn to open warfare
(which may, according to circumstances, take the form of issuing the first agitational leaflet or
the first issue of a newspaper, or of organising the first demonstration). Usually the initiation of
such actions ends in an immediate and complete fiasco. Immediate and complete, because this
open warfare was not the result of a systematic and carefully thought-out and gradually prepared
plan for a prolonged and stubborn struggle, but simply the result of the spontaneous growth of
traditional study circle work; because, naturally, the police, in almost every case, knew the
principal leaders of the local movement, since they had already “gained a reputation” for
themselves in their student days, and the police waited only for the right moment to make their
raid. They deliberately allowed the study circle sufficient time to develop its work so that they
might, obtain a palpable corpus delicti, and they always permitted several of the persons known
to them to remain at liberty “for breeding” (which, as far as I know, is the technical term used
both by our people and by the gendarmes). One cannot help comparing this kind of warfare with
that conducted by a mass of peasants, armed with clubs, against modern troops. And one can
only wonder at the vitality of the movement which expanded, grew, and scored victories despite
the total lack of training on the part of the fighters. True, from the historical point of view, the
primitiveness of equipment was not only inevitable at first, but even legitimate as one of the
conditions for the wide recruiting of fighters, but as soon as serious war operations began (and
they began in fact with the strikes in the summer of 1896), the defects in our fighting
organisations made themselves felt to an ever-increasing degree. The government, at first thrown
into confusion and committing a number of blunders (e.g., its appeal to the public describing the
misdeeds of the socialists, or the banishment of workers from the capitals to provincial industrial
centres), very soon adapted itself to the new conditions of the struggle and managed to deploy
well its perfectly equipped detachments of agents provocateurs, spies, and gendarmes. Raids
became so frequent, affected such a vast number of people, and cleared out the local study circles
so thoroughly that the masses of the workers lost literally all their leaders, the movement
assumed an amazingly sporadic character, and it became utterly impossible to establish
continuity and coherence in the work. The terrible dispersion of the local leaders; the fortuitous
character of the study circle memberships; the lack of training in, and the narrow outlook on, theoretical, political, and organisational questions were all the inevitable result of the conditions described above. Things have reached such a pass that in several places the workers, because of our lack of self-restraint and the inability to maintain secrecy, begin to lose faith in the intellectuals and to avoid them; the intellectuals, they say, are much too careless and cause police raids!

Anyone who has the slightest knowledge of the movement is aware that all thinking Social-Democrats have at last begun to regard these amateurish methods as a disease....

B. Primitiveness and Economism

We must now deal with a question that has undoubtedly come to the mind of every reader. Can a connection be established between primitiveness as growing pains that affect the whole movement, and Economism, which is one of the currents in Russian Social-Democracy? We think that it can. Lack of practical training, of ability to carry on organisational work is certainly common to us all, including those who have from the very outset unswervingly stood for revolutionary Marxism. Of course, were it only lack of practical training, no one could blame the practical workers. But the term “primitiveness” embraces something more than lack of training; it denotes a narrow scope of revolutionary work generally, failure to understand that a good organisation of revolutionaries cannot be built on the basis of such narrow activity, and lastly — and this is the main thing — attempts to justify this narrowness and to elevate it to a special “theory”, i.e., subservience to spontaneity on this question too. Once such attempts were revealed, it became clear that primitiveness is connected with Economism and that we shall never rid ourselves of this narrowness of our organisational activity until we rid ourselves of Economism generally (i.e., the narrow conception of Marxist theory, as well as of the role of Social-Democracy and of its political tasks). These attempts manifested themselves in a twofold direction. Some began to say that the working masses themselves have not yet advanced the broad and militant political tasks which the revolutionaries are attempting to “impose” on them; that they must continue to struggle for immediate political demands, to conduct “the economic struggle against the employers and the government”[1] (and, naturally, corresponding to this struggle which is “accessible” to the mass movement there must be an organisation that will be “accessible” to the most untrained youth). Others, far removed from any theory of “gradualness”, said that it is possible and necessary to “bring about a political revolution”, but that this does not require building a strong organisation of revolutionaries to train the proletariat in steadfast and stubborn struggle. All we need do is to snatch up our old friend, the “accessible” cudgel. To drop metaphor, it means that we must organise a general strike,[2] or that we must stimulate the “spiritless” progress of the working-class movement by means of “excitative terror”. Both these trends, the opportunists and the “revolutionists”, bow to the prevailing amateurism; neither believes that it can be eliminated, neither understands our primary and imperative practical task to establish an organisation of revolutionaries capable of lending energy, stability, and continuity to the political struggle....

Indeed, does the “task” of advancing concrete demands by the masses, demands that promise palpable results, call for special efforts to create a stable, centralised, militant organisation of
revolutionaries? Cannot such a “task” be carried out even by masses that do not “struggle against the political police” at all? Could this task, moreover, be fulfilled if, in addition to the few leaders, it were not undertaken by such workers (the overwhelming majority) as are quite incapable of “struggling against the political police”? Such workers, average people of the masses, are capable of displaying enormous energy and self-sacrifice in strikes and in street, battles with the police and the troops, and are capable (in fact, are alone capable) of determining the outcome of our entire movement — but the struggle against the political police requires special qualities; it requires professional revolutionaries. 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. Thus, we have reached the question of the relation between an organisation of professional revolutionaries and the labour movement pure and simple. Although this question has found little reflection in literature, it has greatly engaged us “politicians” in conversations and polemics with comrades who gravitate more or less towards Economism. It is a question meriting special treatment. But before taking it up, let us offer one further quotation by way of illustrating our thesis on the connection between primitiveness and Economism....

C. Organisation of Workers and Organisation of Revolutionaries

It is only natural to expect that for a Social-Democrat whose conception of the political struggle coincides with the conception of the “economic struggle against the employers and the government”, the “organisation of revolutionaries” will more or less coincide with the “organisation of workers”. This, in fact, is what actually happens; so that when we speak of organisation, we literally speak in different tongues. I vividly recall, for example, a conversation I once had with a fairly consistent Economist, with whom I had not been previously acquainted. We were discussing the pamphlet, *Who Will Bring About the Political Revolution?* and were soon of a mind that its principal defect was its ignoring of the question of organisation. We had begun to assume full agreement between us; but, as the conversation proceeded, it became evident that we were talking of different things. My interlocutor accused the author of ignoring strike funds, mutual benefit societies, etc., whereas I had in mind an organisation of revolutionaries as an essential factor in “bringing about” the political revolution. As soon as the disagreement became clear, there was hardly, as I remember, a single question of principle upon which I was in agreement with the Economist!

What was the source of our disagreement? It was the fact that on questions both of organisation and of politics the Economists are forever lapsing from Social-Democracy into trade-unionism. The political struggle of Social-Democracy is far more extensive and complex than the economic struggle of the workers against the employers and the government. Similarly (indeed for that reason), the organisation of the revolutionary Social-Democratic Party must inevitably be of a kind different from the organisation of the workers designed for this struggle. The workers’ organisation must in the first place be a trade union organisation; secondly, it must be as broad as possible; and thirdly, it must be as public as conditions will allow (here, and further on, of course, I refer only to absolutist Russia). On the other hand, the organisation of the revolutionaries must consist first and foremost of people who make revolutionary activity their profession (for which reason I speak of the organisation of revolutionaries, meaning
revolutionary Social-Democrats). In view of this common characteristic of the members of such an organisation, *all distinctions as between workers and intellectuals*, not to speak of distinctions of trade and profession, in both categories, *must be effaced*. Such an organisation must perforce not be very extensive and must be as secret as possible...

A small, compact core of the most reliable, experienced, and hardened workers, with responsible representatives in the principal districts and connected by all the rules of strict secrecy with the organisation of revolutionaries, can, with the widest support of the masses and without any formal organisation, perform *all* the functions of a trade union organisation, in a manner, moreover, desirable to Social-Democracy. Only in this way can we secure the *consolidation* and development of a *Social-Democratic* trade union movement, despite all the gendarmes.

It may be objected that an organisation which is so *loose* that it is not even definitely formed, and which has not even an enrolled and registered membership, cannot be called an organisation at all. Perhaps so. Not the name is important. What is important is that this “organisation without members” shall do everything that is required, and from the very outset ensure a solid connection between our future trade unions and socialism. Only an incorrigible utopian would have a *broad* organisation of workers, with elections, reports, universal suffrage, etc., under the autocracy.

The moral to be drawn from this is simple. If we begin with the solid foundation of a strong organisation of revolutionaries, we can ensure the stability of the movement as a whole and carry out the aims both of Social-Democracy and of trade unions proper. If, however, we begin with a broad workers’ organisation, which is supposedly most “accessible” to the masses (but which is actually most accessible to the gendarmes and makes revolutionaries most accessible to the police), we shall achieve neither the one aim nor the other; we shall not eliminate our rule-of-thumb methods, and, because we remain scattered and our forces are constantly broken up by the police, we shall only make trade unions of the Zubatov and Ozerov type the more accessible to the masses.

What, properly speaking, should be the functions of the organisation of revolutionaries? ...

I assert: (1) that no revolutionary movement can endure without a stable organisation of leaders maintaining continuity; (2) that the broader the popular mass drawn spontaneously into the struggle, which forms the basis of the movement and participates in it, the more urgent the need for such an organisation, and the more solid this organisation must be (for it is much easier for all sorts of demagogues to side-track the more backward sections of the masses); (3) that such an organisation must consist chiefly of people professionally engaged in revolutionary activity; (4) that in an autocratic state, the more we *confine* the membership of such an organisation 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 organisation; and (5) the *greater* will be the number of people from the working class and from the other social classes who will be able to join the movement and perform active work in it.
I invite our Economists, terrorists, and “Economists-terrorists”[9] to confute these propositions. At the moment, I shall deal only with the last two points. The question as to whether it is easier to wipe out “a dozen wisemen” or “a hundred fools” reduces itself to the question, above considered, whether it is possible to have a mass organisation when the maintenance of strict secrecy is essential. We can never give a mass organisation that degree of secrecy without which there can be no question of persistent and continuous struggle against the government. To concentrate all secret functions in the hands of as small a number of professional revolutionaries as possible does not mean that the latter will “do the thinking for all” and that the rank and file will not take an active part in the movement. On the contrary, the membership will promote increasing numbers of the professional revolutionaries from its ranks; for it will know that it is not enough for a few students and for a few working men waging the economic struggle to gather in order to form a “committee”, but that it takes years to train oneself to be a professional revolutionary; and the rank and file will “think”, not only of amateurish methods, but of such training. Centralisation of the secret functions of the organisation by no means implies centralisation of all the functions of the movement. Active participation of the widest masses in the illegal press will not diminish because a “dozen” professional revolutionaries centralise the secret functions connected with this work; on the contrary, it will increase tenfold. In this way, and in this way alone, shall we ensure that reading the illegal press, writing for it, and to some extent even distributing it, will almost cease to be secret work, for the police will soon come to realise the folly and impossibility of judicial and administrative red-tape procedure over every copy of a publication that is being distributed in the thousands. This holds not only for the press, but for every function of the movement, even for demonstrations. The active and widespread participation of the masses will not suffer; on the contrary, it will benefit by the fact that a “dozen” experienced revolutionaries, trained professionally no less than the police, will centralise all the secret aspects of the work — the drawing up of leaflets, the working out of approximate plans; and the appointing of bodies of leaders for each urban district, for each institution, etc. (I know that exception will be taken to my “undemocratic” views, but I shall reply below fully to this anything but intelligent objection.) Centralisation of the most secret functions in an organisation of revolutionaries will not diminish, but rather increase the extent and enhance the quality of the activity of a large number of other organisations that are intended for a broad public and are therefore as loose and as non-secret as possible, such as workers’ trade unions; workers’ self-education circles and circles for reading illegal literature; and socialist, as well as democratic, circles among all other sections of the population; etc., etc. We must have such circles, trade unions, and organisations everywhere in as large a number as possible and with the widest variety of functions; but it would be absurd and harmful to confound them with the organisation of revolutionaries, to efface the border-line between them, to make still more hazy the all too faint recognition of the fact that in order to “serve” the mass movement we must have people who will devote themselves exclusively to Social-Democratic activities, and that such people must train themselves patiently and steadfastly to be professional revolutionaries....

D. The Scope of Organisational Work

...it is necessary to have a strong organisation of tried revolutionaries. The more secret such an organisation is, the stronger and more widespread will be the confidence in the Party. As we know, in time of war, it is not only of the utmost importance to imbue one’s own army with
confidence in its strength, but it is important also to convince the enemy and all neutral elements of this strength; friendly neutrality may sometimes decide the issue. If such an organisation existed, one built up on a firm theoretical foundation and possessing a Social-Democratic organ, we should have no reason to fear that the movement might be diverted from its path by the numerous “outside” elements that are attracted to it. (On the contrary, it is precisely at the present time, with amateurism prevalent, that we see many Social-Democrats leaning towards the Credo and only imagining that they are Social Democrats.) In a word, specialisation necessarily presupposes centralisation, and in turn imperatively calls for it....

A worker-agitator who is at all gifted and “promising” must not be left to work eleven hours a day in a factory. We must arrange that he be maintained by the Party; that he may go underground in good time; that he change the place of his activity, if he is to enlarge his experience, widen his outlook, and be able to hold out for at least a few years in the struggle against the gendarmes. As the spontaneous rise of their movement becomes broader and deeper, the working-class masses promote from their ranks not only an increasing number of talented agitators, but also talented organisers, propagandists, and “practical workers” in the best sense of the term (of whom there are so few among our intellectuals who, for the most part, in the Russian manner, are somewhat careless and sluggish in their habits). When we have forces of specially trained worker-revolutionaries who have gone through extensive preparation (and, of course, revolutionaries “of all arms of the service”), no political police in the world will then be able to contend with them, for these forces, boundlessly devoted to the revolution, will enjoy the boundless confidence of the widest masses of the workers. We are directly to blame for doing too little to “stimulate” the workers to take this path, common to them and to the “intellectuals”, of professional revolutionary training, and for all too often dragging them back by our silly speeches about what is “accessible” to the masses of the workers, to the “average workers”, etc....

Notes

[1] Rabochaya Mysl and Rabocheye Dyelo, especially the Reply to Plekhanov.—Lenin

[2] See “Who Will Bring About the Political Revolution?” in the collection published in Russia, entitled The Proletarian Struggle. Re-issued by the Kiev Committee.—Lenin


[9] This term is perhaps more applicable to Svoboda than the former, for in an article entitled “The Regeneration of Revolutionisim” the publication defends terrorism, while in the article at present under review it defends Economism. One might say of Svoboda that “it would if it could, but it can’t”. Its wishes and intentions are of the very best — but the result is utter confusion; this is chiefly due to the fact that, while Svoboda advocates continuity of organisation, it refuses to recognise continuity of revolutionary thought and Social-Democratic theory. It wants to revive the professional revolutionary (“The Regeneration of Revolutionism”), and to that end proposes, first, excitative terrorism, and, secondly, — an organisation of average workers" (Svoboda, No. 1,
p. 66, et seq.), as less likely to be “pushed on from outside”. In other words, it proposes to pull the house down to use the timber for heating it.—*Lenin*