



# **LENIN'S**

## ***"LEFT-WING" COMMUNISM:***

### ***AN INFANTILE DISORDER***

**STUDY GUIDE**

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**COMMUNIST PARTY OF CANADA, 2021**

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### Introduction

*“Left-Wing” Communism: An Infantile Disorder* continues to be one of Lenin’s most important contributions to the theoretical development of the international Communist movement. Although the book was written in 1920 and the forms of ultra-left politics have changed in the last century, much of the content remains relevant to debates on strategy and tactics in Canada today.

The one hundred or so pages of this pamphlet are packed with the polemics of the day. As is the case with most of Lenin’s writing, the purpose of the work was to try and grapple with practical theoretical problems. Because of the specificities of the historical period the book is based on, it is necessary to not only read Lenin but to creatively apply his contributions to our own struggles. This study guide attempts to do this by providing quotes from as much of *“Left-Wing” Communism* itself as possible, while contextualizing and applying lessons

from these quotes. Readers of this study guide are still recommended to read the whole of the original work themselves as it is impossible to include all of the rich content of *“Left-Wing” Communism*.

We should start by putting the book as a whole in its historical context. The book was written in 1920 and published just three years after 1917’s Great October Socialist Revolution. Lenin opens the book with the lines: “We now possess quite considerable international experience, which shows very definitely that certain fundamental features of our revolution have a significance that is not local, or peculiarly national, or Russian alone, but international.” The goal was to share the Bolshevik Party’s<sup>1</sup> experience with the newly formed Communist International.

International Communist parties were eager to learn these lessons. The October Revolution had had an electrifying

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<sup>1</sup> The Bolshevik Party was renamed the “Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik)” in 1918 and the “Communist Party of the Soviet Union” in 1952

effect around the world. This was true for Canada as well. The events of 1917 in Russia inspired a wave of strikes in Canada, including the Winnipeg General Strike in 1919, and it led to the formation of our party, the Communist Party of Canada, in 1921. Communists in Canada looked to Lenin and the Bolsheviks for guidance in building the theoretical basis for this new party.

Back in Russia the Revolution was besieged by invading imperialist powers and the counter-revolutionary White Army. The Bolsheviks were forced to sign the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in 1918 with Germany in order to limit an invasion and end Russia's involvement in the great imperialist massacre of the First World War. This concessionary tactic was decried by leftist voices in Russia both inside and outside the Bolshevik Party. In contrast to these voices, Lenin called for theoretical firmness but *flexible tactics* in order to lead the world's first socialist state forward.

Meanwhile, some of the political forces on the left internationally that united with others to form the new Communist parties, were what Lenin defined as "Left-Wing' Communist" forces. Today, we usually refer to the followers of these mistakes or ideologies of these kinds as "leftist" or "ultra-leftist".<sup>2</sup> In Canada, this included some members that were attracted to the CPC from an anarcho syndicalist background, either from the Industrial Workers of the World or the One Big Union. Some of these members stayed and became cadre for the CPC, leading heroic struggles in the

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<sup>2</sup> The term "leftist" is used to describe individuals, mistakes and ideas that lean towards left opportunism. The term "ultra-leftism" is used to describe more organized groups (Trotskyist, Maoist, Anarchist, etc) and ideologies that are more clearly anti-communist.

decades ahead, and some left the CPC to continue with sectarian syndicalist approaches that soon led to the decline of the IWW and OBU. Lenin's writings helped to build unity in the CPC around tactics such as our participation in bourgeois elections, participation in social democratic and reactionary trade unions and Lenin helped to clarify our approach to compromises, retreats and alliances.

The material basis for petty-bourgeois radicalism and ultra-leftism was not eliminated with the publication of Lenin's pamphlet and these ideologies and tendencies continue to create problems on the left and in our own movement. There are still those that substitute their subjective desire for revolution for a clear headed analysis of the objective conditions and an appraisal of the balance of class forces. We live in a revolutionary era in regards to the big picture, but Canada is not currently in a revolutionary moment. Lenin explains that a revolutionary crisis is required for a vanguard party to lead *masses* of the working class and, more broadly, the working people to power and to begin a socialist transformation of society.

In such non-revolutionary times, some are fooled into believing that capitalism is here to stay and they adopt a reformist orientation to struggle. Some are also bought off by the capitalist class and introduce elements of bourgeois ideology to the working class. It is this right opportunism that is the main enemy within the working class movement, while helping to create its less prevalent but still dangerous cousin: left opportunism. Social democracy, through its failings which become apparent to some, leads a relatively smaller number of those on the broader left towards dismissing all alliances in general, seeing

struggles for reforms as a distraction and closing themselves off in small bubbles of revolutionary purity. The justifiable feeling of horror at capitalism's crimes can lead some to a counter-productive revolutionary impatience and subjectivity. They adopt phrase mongering and idealism since it is easier than getting their hands dirty in struggle and working with political forces that disagree with them. Soon it is forgotten that revolutions are made by masses of working class and oppressed peoples and they substitute left opportunist strategies that rely narrowly on a particular oppressed group in isolation or a small number of the reddest revolutionaries. For these tendencies, unity is often seen as unnecessary.

The CPC's own Program warns against approaches like these:

The Communist Party is not a party of coups, putsches or conspiracies. It opposes acts of individual terrorism and those who would replace persistent and constant work for the revolutionary education and organization of the masses with empty pseudo-revolutionary phrases and irresponsible calls for action without regard to the actual situation.<sup>3</sup>

As increasing numbers of people turn towards socialism and start to ask questions about the most effective path towards socialism, it is absolutely necessary that we update our application of Leninist strategies and tactics to the Canadian context. Party-wide group study is an important tool to build unity in our theoretical outlook and consequently in our action. It is the hope of the Central Education Commission that this study guide will be a step forward towards the necessary goal of building

discipline and unity in our Party. As such we welcome any feedback that may arise in the discussion of this document in clubs. This may include suggestions for changes to this study guide or ideas for future study guides. Please email feedback to the Education Commission chair Naomi Rankin at [naomirankin@shaw.ca](mailto:naomirankin@shaw.ca).

## The need for discipline

The second Chapter of "*Left-Wing Communism*" is entitled "An Essential Condition of the Bolsheviks' Success". For Lenin, this essential condition is discipline. He writes:

It is, I think, almost universally realised at present that the Bolsheviks could not have retained power for two and a half months, let alone two and a half years, without the most rigorous and truly iron discipline in our Party, or without the fullest and unreserved support from the entire mass of the working class, that is, from all thinking, honest, devoted and influential elements in it, capable of leading the backward strata or carrying the latter along with them.<sup>4</sup>

Lenin writes passionately about the strength of the imperialist reaction and the absolute necessity for the dictatorship of the proletariat, a "determined and most ruthless war" waged by the working class against the bourgeoisie. He goes on to say: "Victory over the bourgeoisie is impossible without a long, stubborn and desperate life-and-death struggle which calls for tenacity, discipline, and a single and inflexible will."

We often struggle with how to build discipline and unity in our own Party.

<sup>3</sup> <http://communist-party.ca/chapter-8-the-communist-party/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch02.htm>

Lenin goes into detail about the *process* of building discipline and the importance of a correct revolutionary theory as a precondition for discipline.

The first questions to arise are: how is the discipline of the proletariat's revolutionary party maintained? How is it tested? How is it reinforced? First, by the class-consciousness of the proletarian vanguard and by its devotion to the revolution, by its tenacity, self-sacrifice and heroism. Second, by its ability to link up, maintain the closest contact, and—if you wish—merge, in certain measure, with the broadest masses of the working people—primarily with the proletariat, *but also with the non-proletarian* masses of working people. Third, by the correctness of the political leadership exercised by this vanguard, by the correctness of its political strategy and tactics, provided the broad masses have seen, *from their own experience*, that they are correct. Without these conditions, discipline in a revolutionary party really capable of being the party of the advanced class, whose mission it is to overthrow the bourgeoisie and transform the whole of society, cannot be achieved. Without these conditions, all attempts to establish discipline inevitably fall flat and end up in phrasemongering and clowning. On the other hand, these conditions cannot emerge at once. They are created only by prolonged effort and hard-won experience. Their creation is facilitated by a correct revolutionary theory, which, in its turn, is not a dogma, but assumes final shape only in close connection with the practical activity of a truly mass and truly revolutionary movement.<sup>5</sup>

Lenin is talking here about the need for a vanguard party to earn their leadership. It is not enough to declare yourself a vanguard, but the broad masses need to

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch02.htm>

have seen “from their own experience” that the vanguard’s political strategy and tactics are correct. Lenin goes on to describe what allowed the Bolsheviks to earn their place as the revolutionary vanguard of the working class in Russia.

On the one hand, Bolshevism arose in 1903 on a very firm foundation of Marxist theory. The correctness of this revolutionary theory, and of it alone, has been proved, not only by world experience throughout the nineteenth century, but especially by the experience of the seekings and vacillations, the errors and disappointments of revolutionary thought in Russia. For about half a century—approximately from the forties to the nineties of the last century—progressive thought in Russia, oppressed by a most brutal and reactionary tsarism, sought eagerly for a correct revolutionary theory, and followed with the utmost diligence and thoroughness each and every “last word” in this sphere in Europe and America. Russia achieved Marxism—the only correct revolutionary theory—through the agony she experienced in the course of half a century of unparalleled torment and sacrifice, of unparalleled revolutionary heroism, incredible energy, devoted searching, study, practical trial, disappointment, verification, and comparison with European experience. Thanks to the political emigration caused by tsarism, revolutionary Russia, in the second half of the nineteenth century, acquired a wealth of international links and excellent information on the forms and theories of the world revolutionary movement, such as no other country possessed.

On the other hand, Bolshevism, which had arisen on this granite foundation of theory, went through fifteen years of practical history (1903–17) unequalled anywhere in the world in its wealth of

experience. During those fifteen years, no other country knew anything even approximating to that revolutionary experience, that rapid and varied succession of different forms of the movement—legal and illegal, peaceful and stormy, underground and open, local circles and mass movements, and parliamentary and terrorist forms. In no other country has there been concentrated, in so brief a period, such a wealth of forms, shades, and methods of struggle of all classes of modern society, a struggle which, owing to the backwardness of the country and the severity of the tsarist yoke, matured with exceptional rapidity, and assimilated most eagerly and successfully the appropriate “last word” of American and European political experience.<sup>6</sup>

In the first paragraph of the quote above Lenin is pointing to the importance of a scientific socialist outlook as a solid basis for a vanguard party. Russia came to Marxism through its own brutal process of struggle against Tsarism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Lenin then focuses on the *practical* application of scientific socialism which gave rise to a wealth of rich experience. Because of the dynamic, rapidly changing nature of the struggle against Tsarism in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Bolsheviks came to realize the importance of a flexible approach to tactics. It is this experience that Lenin sees as vital to pass on to the rest of the world so that mistakes can be avoided. Lenin details this experience in Chapter 3, “The Principle Stages in the History of Bolshevism”.

## The roots of ultra-leftism

As Marxists, we know that ideas do not fall from the sky. This holds true for ideas that are both helpful or harmful

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch02.htm>

to our revolutionary movement. If we are identifying “ultra-leftism” as a set of ideas that are necessary to challenge and defeat, we need to take a deep dive into where these ideas come from and how they interact with other ideologies. Lenin begins Chapter 4, “The Struggle Against Which Enemies Within the Working-Class Movement Helped Bolshevism Develop, Gain Strength, and Become Steeled,” with some of these important questions. This chapter, in keeping with the theme of the book, explores the Bolshevik experience and compares it to debates arising in the revolutionary movements of other countries.

He does not begin by attacking leftism or ultra-leftists, but by exposing “Bolshevism’s principal enemy within the working-class movement:

First and foremost, the struggle against opportunism which in 1914 definitely developed into social-chauvinism and definitely sided with the bourgeoisie, against the proletariat. Naturally, this was Bolshevism’s principal enemy within the working-class movement. It still remains the principal enemy on an international scale. The Bolsheviks have been devoting the greatest attention to this enemy. This aspect of Bolshevik activities is now fairly well known abroad too.

Lenin then moves on to addressing ultra-leftism, which he describes as “petty-bourgeois revolutionism”.

It was, however, different with Bolshevism’s other enemy within the working-class movement. Little is known in other countries of the fact that Bolshevism took shape, developed and became steeled in the long years of struggle against *petty-bourgeois revolutionism*, which smacks of anarchism, or borrows something from the latter and, in all essential matters, does not measure up to the

conditions and requirements of a consistently proletarian class struggle. Marxist theory has established—and the experience of all European revolutions and revolutionary movements has fully confirmed—that the petty proprietor, the small master (a social type existing on a very extensive and even mass scale in many European countries), who, under capitalism, always suffers oppression and very frequently a most acute and rapid deterioration in his conditions of life, and even ruin, easily goes to revolutionary extremes, but is incapable of perseverance, organisation, discipline and steadfastness. A petty bourgeois driven to frenzy by the horrors of capitalism is a social phenomenon which, like anarchism, is characteristic of all capitalist countries. The instability of such revolutionism, its barrenness, and its tendency to turn rapidly into submission, apathy, phantasms, and even a frenzied infatuation with one bourgeois fad or another—all this is common knowledge. However, a theoretical or abstract recognition of these truths does not at all rid revolutionary parties of old errors, which always crop up at unexpected occasions, in somewhat new forms, in a hitherto unfamiliar garb or surroundings, in an unusual—a more or less unusual—situation.<sup>7</sup>

Here Lenin points to the material basis for anarchism and other brands of ultra-leftist ideology. “Petty-bourgeois” is not used as an insult here, but points to the fact that the basis of these ideas often come from non-working class sections of the people who are oppressed by capitalism. The petty-bourgeois class was once defined as mainly peasants, shop keepers and artisans. What united these groups was their relationship to the means of production: they owned their own small scale production but

still had to work. If they exploited other workers, they still had to work alongside them. In Canada there is still a shrinking traditional petty-bourgeoisie made up of small scale farmers, small business owners. However, these days the petty-bourgeoisie can include other elements of the “middle strata” such as doctors and lawyers as well as some self-employed contractors and intellectuals, although the line between the working-class and petty-bourgeoisie is blurred through the corporate practice of “contracting out” and the rise of the “gig economy”, which is also bound to have an effect on class consciousness and struggle.

In addition to a tendency towards undisciplined revolutionary gesticulation, petty-bourgeois revolutionism also expresses itself as individualism: an inability to work collectively, accept Party discipline and abide by the principles of democratic centralism. This can be attributed to the fact that the petty-bourgeois as a class have an individualized relationship with the means of production. This is contrasted to the working-class whose relationship to production instills discipline and the need for unity and organization.

We should say here that that not all people from petty-bourgeois backgrounds are advocates of leftist positions. The petty-bourgeoisie is only the material base and these ideas circulate and compete with other ideas in a dynamic way.

We can test this theory by looking at social groups and movements where ultra-leftist ideas receive the most currency. Today it is clear that petty bourgeois radicalism of various stripes continues to have a base amongst intellectuals and students in academic circles. Various separatist forms of petty bourgeois radicalism are most often found amongst intellectuals, professionals and small business owners

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch04.htm>

that are from oppressed nations and social groups. For example, movements for Black liberation in the United States have had to contend with Black nationalist and Black capitalist ideas that are often competing with a Communist strategy of multi-racial, anti-racist, working-class unity. Radical Feminism, emerging in the 1970s in North America, often advocated essentialist and ahistorical views of women's oppression with separatist strategies for liberation. Similarly, sections of the New Left in the late 1960s came to opportunistically believe that the youth and student movement would be the main revolutionary social group, instead of the working class as understood by those with a more scientific socialist outlook. In each of these examples, the revolutionary role of the working class is substituted for a cross-class democratic movement.

These days, there are many ideas circulating that promote that a certain social group is the most oppressed and are therefore the most revolutionary. While it is important to build solidarity and unity between all groups oppressed by capitalism, it is often a leftist mistake to rank oppressions as if they are in contradiction or competition with each other. Communists need to struggle against all forms of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ageism and ableism while connecting these struggles to the underlying problem: capitalism. In this sense we should seek to build "convergence of struggles" with the class struggle at the core of our work, while understanding the need to connect the class struggle to the struggle against racism and patriarchy. Class unity cannot be built without fighting oppression, but oppression cannot be defeated without the class unity necessary to defeat capitalism. Class unity, not separatism, is the Communist strategy.

It may be possible to work with proponents of this or that ultra-leftist position in different struggles where unity can be found, but it is a serious mistake to adopt their ideology on the basis of it sounding the "most radical."

Lenin also makes a keen observation that left and right opportunism, which are seemingly at odds, actually often have a symbiotic relationship. He writes that ultra-leftism or "Anarchism was not infrequently a kind of penalty for the opportunist sins of the working-class movement. The two monstrosities complemented each other." Ultra-leftism is helped along by reformist strategies of class collaborationism such as a narrow focus on electoralism or an emphasis on lobbying and fear of mass mobilization. Ultra-left ideas are often a knee jerk reaction to right opportunism. It is the role of Communists to advance strategies for mass action and defeat right opportunism, which will cut much of the ground out from under ultra-leftism.

Lenin also touches on an important mistake that is common to many ultra-left groups today when he is arguing against the Russian anarchist oriented Socialist Revolutionary Party. He says that that party "considered itself particularly "revolutionary", or "Left", because of its recognition of individual terrorism, assassination—something that we Marxists emphatically rejected." While left-wing terrorism is much less of a problem in North America at the moment (as opposed to right-wing terror), there are still many people on the broad Left that confuse tactics with strategy and goals. These ultra-leftist mistakes label some tactics as inherently "revolutionary" divorced from a broader strategy or their goals. For example, some anarchists believe that all protest tactics against any authority are inherently progressive, therefore violence in

Hong Kong or Syria is to be supported, regardless of the political goals of these forces.

Other examples of mistakes of this nature include fetishization of certain tactics, especially “direct action”, like putting a lot of stock in stopping traffic as an economic disruption. In general Communists should support tactics, including “direct actions” that are oriented towards building mass action. In some circumstances small scale actions involving civil disobedience can galvanize mass action. In other contexts small scale actions can discourage mass action by alienating potential allies or some small actions opportunistically ignore the need for mass action.

Lenin continually emphasizes the need for flexibility of tactics and a combination of legal and illegal political activity depending on the specific circumstances. As Lenin writes: “...anyone who is out to think up for the workers some kind of recipe that will provide them with cut-and-dried solutions for all contingencies, or promises that the policy of the revolutionary proletariat will never come up against difficult or complex situations, is simply a charlatan.”

Discussion questions on “The roots of ultra-leftism” section:

1. What forms of “petty bourgeois revolutionism” are prevalent in various movements in Canada today? What should be our approach to them?
2. What contemporary ultra-left organizations or tactics arise from right opportunist or class collaborationist led movements? How do ultra-left tactics serve to strengthen right opportunism in these areas of struggle?
3. What are successful examples of “direct actions” that propelled struggles

forward and what are some examples of fetishization of tactics that led to avoidable problems?

## Anti-Party confusion

In Chapter 5, Lenin addresses leftist ideas that confuse “the leaders, the Party, the class and the masses”. These ideas have much in common with anti-authority principles in anarchist thought. However, Lenin is not challenging anarchists but a leftist split from the newly formed Communist Party of Germany. He begins by quoting the splitters’ pamphlet:

“. . . Consequently, two Communist parties are now arrayed against each other:

“*One is a party of leaders*, which is out to organise the revolutionary struggle and to direct it from *above*, accepting compromises and parliamentarianism so as to create a situation enabling it to join a coalition government exercising a dictatorship.

“*The other is a mass party*, which expects an upsurge of the revolutionary struggle from *below*, which knows and applies a single method in this struggle—a method which clearly leads to the goal—and rejects all parliamentary and opportunist methods. That single method is the unconditional *overthrow of the bourgeoisie*, so as then to set up the proletarian class dictatorship for the accomplishment of socialism. . . .

“... There—the dictatorship of leaders; here—the dictatorship of the masses! That is our slogan.”

Lenin then goes on to describe in detail the definitions of the masses, classes, political parties and leaders to cut through obfuscation. It is still common today to find views on the ultra-left that are anti-Communist in the form of being anti-political-party. This includes a great many anarchist tendencies as

well as Trotskyists who insist on creating a dichotomy between “socialism from above” (encompassing all socialist societies) and their own pure brand of “socialism from below”. In a footnote from this chapter Lenin makes the keen observation that, “mere acceptance of Marxism does not save one from errors. We Russians know this especially well, because Marxism has been very often the “fashion” in our country.”

Lenin makes it clear that political parties can never be divorced from their class character. Leaders of those parties represent class interests as well.

The mere presentation of the question—“dictatorship of the party *or* dictatorship of the class; dictatorship (party) of the leaders, *or* dictatorship (party) of the masses?”—testifies to most incredibly and hopelessly muddled thinking. These people want to *invent* something quite out of the ordinary, and, in their effort to be clever, make themselves ridiculous...

...classes are led by political parties; that political parties, as a general rule, are run by more or less stable groups composed of the most authoritative, influential and experienced members, who are elected to the most responsible positions, and are called leaders. All this is elementary. All this is clear and simple.<sup>8</sup>

Lenin goes on to focus on “anti-leadership” ideas. He notes that Marx and Engels denounced leaders from the “labour aristocracy”<sup>9</sup> and that it is now

8 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch05.htm>

9 The term “labour aristocracy” was first used by Engels but was popularized by Lenin. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century this was referring to better paid skilled craftsmen in imperialist countries who were organized into craft unions. Craft unions were organized on the basis of skilled trade and not by branch of industry (ie. craft unionism

necessary to denounce the leadership of the Second International (the social democratic international). The problem is not denouncing specific leaders worthy of denunciation, but to denounce all leaders. An absolute anti-leadership orientation in the labour movement is sometimes called “rank-and-file-ism” today.

The divergence between “leaders” and “masses” was brought out with particular clarity and sharpness in all countries at the end of the imperialist war and following it. The principal reason for this was explained many times by Marx and Engels between the years 1852 and 1892, from the example of Britain. That country’s exclusive position led to the emergence, from the “masses”, of a semi-petty-bourgeois, opportunist “labour aristocracy”. The leaders of this labour aristocracy were constantly going over to the bourgeoisie, and were directly or indirectly on its pay roll. Marx earned the honour of incurring the hatred of these disreputable persons by openly branding them as traitors. Present-day (twentieth-century) imperialism has given a few advanced countries an exceptionally privileged position, which, everywhere in the Second International, has produced a certain type of traitor, opportunist, and social-chauvinist leaders, who champion the interests of their own craft, their own section of the labour aristocracy. The opportunist parties have become separated from the “masses”, i.e., from the broadest strata of the working people, their majority, the lowest-paid workers. The revolutionary proletariat cannot be victorious unless this evil is combated, unless the opportunist, social-traitor

vs. industrial unionism). Other Marxists have used the term more generally to describe a trade union leadership in imperialist countries who have become ignorant to the struggles of the majority of the working class because of their own privileged objective conditions.

leaders are exposed, discredited and expelled. That is the policy the Third International has embarked on.

To go so far, in this connection, as to contrast, in general, the dictatorship of the masses with a dictatorship of the leaders is ridiculously absurd, and stupid. What is particularly amusing is that, in fact, instead of the old leaders, who hold generally accepted views on simple matters, new leaders are brought forth (under cover of the slogan “Down with the leaders!”), who talk rank stuff and nonsense.<sup>10</sup>

Lenin’s last paragraph here is reminiscent of the joke that arose during the Occupy movement in 2011 that the best way to find the leaders of an Occupy encampment was to locate those that proclaimed that there were “no leaders” the loudest. A fetishization of horizontal organizing and structurelessness, does not mean that there are no leaders, it just means that those leaders are not accountable in any way. These days, spontaneous waves of protests can sometimes be sparked by social media accounts if the right objective conditions are present. People pointed to the Arab Spring in Egypt as a leaderless movement that was “organized” by social media. However, in these cases there are still leaders that are running social media accounts. It is a weak, disorganized and unaccountable leadership but a leadership none the less. The truth is that organizations with a decision making hierarchy and a clear division of labour are much more accountable, durable and long-lasting than “leaderless” movements. Political parties, which have a program or a broad set of policies that they are united around, are stronger still. Communist parties operate on the Leninist organizational principle of democratic centralism, described in the CPC’s constitution

as combining “the maximum of democratic discussion and participation of the membership in Party life, with the self-imposed obligation to carry out majority decisions and execution of these decisions by an elected centralized leadership capable of leading the entire Party.”<sup>11</sup>

Lenin correctly identifies that the split in the Communist Party of Germany has arrived at an anti-Party position. This leftist, ultra-democratic position ultimately serves the capitalist class. He also warns that a Party is needed long after a revolution.

Repudiation of the Party principle and of Party discipline—that is what the opposition has *arrived at*. And this is tantamount to completely disarming the proletariat in *the interests of the bourgeoisie*. It all adds up to that petty-bourgeois diffuseness and instability, that incapacity for sustained effort, unity and organised action, which, if encouraged, must inevitably destroy any proletarian revolutionary movement. From the standpoint of communism, repudiation of the Party principle means attempting to leap from the eve of capitalism’s collapse (in Germany), not to the lower or the intermediate phase of communism, but to the higher. We in Russia (in the third year since the overthrow of the bourgeoisie) are making the first steps in the transition from capitalism to socialism or the lower stage of communism. Classes still remain, and will remain everywhere *for years after* the proletariat’s conquest of power....

... The abolition of classes means, not merely ousting the landowners and the capitalists—that is something we accomplished with comparative ease; it also means *abolishing the small commodity producers*, and they cannot

10 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch05.htm>

11 <http://communist-party.ca/constitution/>

*be ousted, or crushed; we must learn to live with them. They can (and must) be transformed and re-educated only by means of very prolonged, slow, and cautious organisational work. They surround the proletariat on every side with a petty-bourgeois atmosphere, which permeates and corrupts the proletariat, and constantly causes among the proletariat relapses into petty-bourgeois spinelessness, disunity, individualism, and alternating moods of exaltation and dejection. The strictest centralisation and discipline are required within the political party of the proletariat in order to counteract this, in order that the *organisational* role of the proletariat (and that is its *principal* role) may be exercised correctly, successfully and victoriously. The dictatorship of the proletariat means a persistent struggle—bloody and bloodless, violent and peaceful, military and economic, educational and administrative—against the forces and traditions of the old society. The force of habit in millions and tens of millions is a most formidable force. Without a party of iron that has been tempered in the struggle, a party enjoying the confidence of all honest people in the class in question, a party capable of watching and influencing the mood of the masses, such a struggle cannot be waged successfully.<sup>12</sup>*

#### Discussion questions on “Anti-Party confusion” section:

1. In what movements are “horizontal organizing” principles prevalent today? What are the strengths and weaknesses of this approach in different situations?
2. What are some common anti-Party ideas on the left today? How would we answer these critiques?

## Should Communists work in reformist trade unions?

In Chapter 6, Lenin addresses a very practical tactical question about working within unions with “reactionary” (or non-revolutionary) leaderships. Lenin begins the chapter with an interesting exploration of the role of Russian trade unions, their relationship to the Communist Party and the role trade unions play in the overall functioning of the dictatorship of the proletariat in the new Soviet Republic.

In Russia today, the connection between leaders, party, class and masses, as well as the attitude of the dictatorship of the proletariat and its party to the trade unions, are concretely as follows: the dictatorship is exercised by the proletariat organised in the Soviets<sup>13</sup>; the proletariat is guided by the Communist Party of Bolsheviks, which, according to the figures of the latest Party Congress (April 1920), has a membership of 611,000....

... In its work, the Party relies directly on the *trade unions*, which, according to the data of the last congress (April 1920), now have a membership of over four million and are formally *non-Party*. Actually, all the directing bodies of the vast majority of the unions, and primarily, of course, of the all-Russia general trade union centre or bureau (the All-Russia Central Council of Trade Unions), are made up of Communists and carry out all the directives of the Party. Thus, on the whole, we have a formally non-

13 The Soviets were workers’ councils that emerged originally from the revolutionary uprising in Russia in 1905. These workers councils organized meetings at a factory, city, regional, and then national level. As representative democratic institutions they became a rival political power to the government during 1917, until they became the sole governing structure in Russia after the October Revolution.

12 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch05.htm>

communist, flexible and relatively wide and very powerful proletarian apparatus, by means of which the Party is closely linked up with the *class* and the *masses*, and by means of which, under the leadership of the Party, the *class dictatorship* is exercised.

...Then, of course, all the work of the Party is carried on through the Soviets, which embrace the working masses irrespective of occupation. The district congresses of Soviets are *democratic* institutions, the like of which even the best of the democratic republics of the bourgeois world have never known...

... Such is the general mechanism of the proletarian state power viewed "from above", from the standpoint of the practical implementation of the dictatorship. We hope that the reader will understand why the Russian Bolshevik who has known this mechanism for twenty-five years and has seen it develop out of small, illegal and underground circles, cannot help regarding all this talk about "from above" *or* "from below", about the dictatorship of leaders *or* the dictatorship of the masses, etc., as ridiculous and childish nonsense, something like discussing whether a man's left leg or right arm is of greater use to him.<sup>14</sup>

The final paragraph here is an illustrative dig at the German leftists that failed to recognize the dialectical relationship between leadership and class in the previous chapter. The previous paragraphs outline the leadership of Communists and the Party in the Soviet trade unions, while making it clear that the trade unions are "non-Party", where the majority of members were not Communists, even after a successful revolution. The Soviet trade unions were

mass organizations of the working-class, led by Communists. Lenin outlines this relationship because he sees it as an essential component of working class rule in Russia, in addition to the Soviet (workers' council) system of government which he also highlights.

Lenin is raising the Bolshevik's trade union experience here as a correct orientation in contrast to the German "Lefts" who have mixed up the role of the *Party as a vanguard organization* and the role of the *trade unions as mass organizations*.

We cannot but regard as equally ridiculous and childish nonsense the pompous, very learned, and frightfully revolutionary disquisitions of the German Lefts to the effect that Communists cannot and should not work in reactionary trade unions, that it is permissible to turn down such work, that it is necessary to withdraw from the trade unions and create a brand-new and immaculate "Workers' Union" invented by very pleasant (and, probably, for the most part very youthful) Communists, etc., etc...

...The trade unions were a tremendous step forward for the working class in the early days of capitalist development, inasmuch as they marked a transition from the workers' disunity and helplessness to the *rudiments* of class organisation. When the *revolutionary party of the proletariat*, the *highest* form of proletarian class organisation, began to take shape (and the Party will not merit the name until it learns to weld the leaders into one indivisible whole with the class and the masses) the trade unions inevitably began to reveal *certain* reactionary features, a certain craft narrow-mindedness, a certain tendency to be non-political, a certain inertness, etc. However, the development of the proletariat did not, and could not, proceed anywhere in the world otherwise than through

14 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch06.htm>

the trade unions, through reciprocal action between them and the party of the working class. The proletariat's conquest of political power is a gigantic step forward for the proletariat as a class, and the Party must more than ever and in a new way, not only in the old, educate and guide the trade unions, at the same time bearing in mind that they are and will long remain an indispensable "school of communism" and a preparatory school that trains proletarians to exercise their dictatorship, an indispensable organisation of the workers for the gradual transfer of the management of the whole economic life of the country to the working *class* (and not to the separate trades), and later to all the working people.<sup>15</sup>

Lenin succinctly outlines the important role trade unions have, while recognizing their very real limitations. Many trade unions in Canada are dominated by leaderships that exhibit the characteristics that Lenin describes as: "a certain craft narrow-mindedness, a certain tendency to be non-political, a certain inertness". Today, we use slightly different terms to describe the same phenomena such as "business unionism"<sup>16</sup> when right-wing union leaderships reject union led independent political action. At the same time, even reformist led unions can be "an indispensable 'school of communism'". Even the most right-wing unions in Canada can be forced to take strike actions and can never fully divorce themselves from the class struggle entirely, even if that is what some leaders try and do. It is our duty as Communists to play a vanguard role in trade unions

15 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch06.htm>

16 Business unionism is a term used to describe an ideological orientation in trade union leadership. Business unionism is only interested in the narrow economic self-interest of the particular union and is opposed to "social unionism" or "class struggle unionism".

to defeat this kind of leadership that attempts to keep the labour movement docile. It is the necessary role of unions in the class struggle that allows them to serve as a "school of communism", but they cannot replace the necessary role of a Communist Party as a revolutionary political vanguard.

The ultra-left today, in particular some anarcho-syndicalists and Maoists, argue that today's unions in North America are too reactionary to work in or with. It is true that the majority of the labour movement in Canada today is led by right-wing social reformists, in no small part due to imperialism's attacks on the left in labour during the Cold War. On the whole, we would agree that there are major subjective problems in the leadership of the trade union movement. After all, the leadership of the Canadian Labour Congress has been openly calling for labour's collaboration with business and the government (a right-wing strategy called "tri-partism"), even endorsing Bill Morneau, the ex-Finance Minister and super-wealthy capitalist, to be the next OECD Secretary General in 2020. The AFL-CIO in the United States, to which the "international" unions in Canada also belong, is directly connected to imperialist institutions and acts of aggression against the sovereignty and peace of the peoples of the world. The twentieth century demonstrated that the social democratic leaderships of these unions, for example NDP co-founder David Lewis and many others, were more than happy to collaborate with right-wing forces and state spy agencies to purge the labour movements of Communists. This is all true, but it was also true in Lenin's day, and it did not shake Lenin's determination that Communists needed to work in reactionary unions. The 1920's were a very reactionary period for trade unions in Canada and the US, which were still dominated by craft unionism

at the time. Lenin noted that in advanced imperialist countries, the right-wing was even more established in the labour movement than it had been in Russia. He argued that this did not matter and the strategy should be the same in these countries as it had been in Russia. The basic truth remained that trade unions needed to be mass organizations and that if their membership was limited to revolutionaries, that they would fail in their necessary role in fighting back against the bosses.

Further. In countries more advanced than Russia, a certain reactionism in the trade unions has been and was bound to be manifested in a far greater measure than in our country. Our Mensheviks<sup>17</sup> found support in the trade unions (and to some extent still do so in a small number of unions), as a result of the latter's craft narrow-mindedness, craft selfishness and opportunism. The Mensheviks of the West have acquired a much firmer footing in the trade unions; there the *craft-union, narrow-minded, selfish, case-hardened, covetous, and petty-bourgeois "labour aristocracy", imperialist-minded, and imperialist-corrupted*, has developed into a much stronger section than in our country...

...We are waging a struggle against the "labour aristocracy" in the name of the masses of the workers and in order to win them over to our side; we are waging the struggle against the opportunist and social-chauvinist leaders in order to win the working class over to our side. It would be absurd to forget this most elementary and most self-evident truth. Yet it is this very absurdity that the German "Left" Communists perpetrate when, *because* of the reactionary and counter-revolutionary character of

the trade union *top leadership*, they jump to the conclusion that . . . we must withdraw from the trade unions, refuse to work in them, and create new and *artificial* forms of labour organisation! ... To refuse to work in the reactionary trade unions means leaving the insufficiently developed or backward masses of workers under the influence of the reactionary leaders, the agents of the bourgeoisie, the labour aristocrats, or "workers who have become completely bourgeois" (cf. Engels's letter to Marx in 1858 about the British workers).

This ridiculous "theory" that Communists should not work in reactionary trade unions reveals with the utmost clarity the frivolous attitude of the "Left" Communists towards the question of influencing the "masses", and their misuse of clamour about the "masses". If you want to help the "masses" and win the sympathy and support of the "masses", you should not fear difficulties, or pinpricks, chicanery, insults and persecution from the "leaders" (who, being opportunists and social-chauvinists, are in most cases directly or indirectly connected with the bourgeoisie and the police), but must absolutely *work wherever the masses are to be found*. You must be capable of any sacrifice, of overcoming the greatest obstacles, in order to carry on agitation and propaganda systematically, perseveringly, persistently and patiently in those institutions, societies and associations—even the most reactionary—in which proletarian or semi-proletarian masses are to be found.

Lenin continues to argue forcefully against "secessionism", which is a tactic advocating that revolutionaries should secede from existing trade unions and form revolutionary unions. There are still those that argue this today, usually along the lines that the existing labour movement is dominated by class

17 The Mensheviks were a Russian right opportunist "Marxist" party that split from the Bolsheviks in 1903, which can today be described as social democratic.

collaborationism (it is) and that unions represent a minority of the working class as a whole (this is also true, especially in the US). Today, mainly anarcho-syndicalist and Maoist groups advance these tactics in North America. The problem with ideas such as these is an overemphasis on subjective problems, for example trade union leaders being the main or only problem, and confusion between the role of a revolutionary vanguard party and a mass labour movement. If trade unions are to be limited to those that agree on the need for revolutionary socialism at the current moment, then the organized fightback of the working class will be very narrow and these trade unions will fail in bringing the organized masses into struggle against the capitalist class. Lenin writes that in the early 1920s, not unlike today's situation, that the majority of workers were just beginning to get organized.

These facts make crystal clear something that is confirmed by thousands of other symptoms, namely, that class-consciousness and the desire for organisation are growing among the proletarian masses, among the rank and file, among the backward elements. Millions of workers in Great Britain, France and Germany are *for the first time* passing from a complete lack of organisation to the elementary, lowest, simplest, and (to those still thoroughly imbued with bourgeois-democratic prejudices) most easily comprehensible form of organisation, namely, the trade unions; yet the revolutionary but imprudent Left Communists stand by, crying out "the masses", "the masses!" but *refusing to work within the trade unions*, on the pretext that they are "reactionary", and invent a brand-new, immaculate little "Workers' Union", which is guiltless of bourgeois-democratic prejudices and innocent of craft or narrow-minded craft-union sins, a union which, they claim, will be (!) a broad organisation.

"Recognition of the Soviet system and the dictatorship" will be the *only* (!) condition of membership.

It would be hard to imagine any greater ineptitude or greater harm to the revolution than that caused by the "Left" revolutionaries! Why, if we in Russia today, after two and a half years of unprecedented victories over the bourgeoisie of Russia and the Entente, were to make "recognition of the dictatorship" a condition of trade union membership, we would be doing a very foolish thing, damaging our influence among the masses, and helping the Mensheviks. The task devolving on Communists is to *convince* the backward elements, to work *among* them, and not to *fence themselves off* from them with artificial and childish "Left" slogans.

There can be no doubt that the Gomperses, the Hendersons, the Jonhaux and the Legiens are very grateful to those "Left" revolutionaries who, like the German opposition "on principle" (heaven preserve us from such "principles"!), or like some of the revolutionaries in the American Industrial Workers of the World advocate quitting the reactionary trade unions and refusing to work in them. These men, the "leaders" of opportunism, will no doubt resort to every device of bourgeois diplomacy and to the aid of bourgeois governments, the clergy, the police and the courts, to keep Communists out of the trade unions, oust them by every means, make their work in the trade unions as unpleasant as possible, and insult, bait and persecute them. We must be able to stand up to all this, agree to make any sacrifice, and even—if need be—to resort to various stratagems, artifices and illegal methods, to evasions and subterfuges, as long as we get into the trade unions, remain in them, and carry on communist

work within them at all costs...<sup>18</sup>

Our own Party, the Communist Party of Canada, struggled against secessionism at its founding. The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the One Big Union (OBU) were influenced by anarcho-syndicalist ideas. While many leading members of the IWW joined the CPC, such as Sam Scarlett and Arthur "Slim" Evans, attempts for the IWW and the OBU as a whole to unite into the CPC failed. Tim Buck outlines this ideological struggle in his book *Thirty Years*, when he describes the debate at a Workers' Party (the name for the CPC at the time) Convention in 1922. He points to Lenin's *Left-Wing Communism*, as being important in building the new Party's unity at the time.

The prominent differences between the radicals at that time were illustrated by the fact that the issue which evoked keenest debate and the only organizational defection in the constituent convention was not the "new" issue of the dictatorship of the proletariat but whether the Workers' Party would make secession from the conservative unions its labor union tactic and the One Big Union its "industrial arm." Enslaved by the idea that secession from the craft unions was the hallmark of militancy, the delegates of the One Big Union demanded of the convention that the new party declare war upon the A.F.L. and, indeed, upon all craft unions. The convention rejected that demand. Guided by the lessons that Lenin had emphasized in his recently translated *Left-Wing Communism*, it called upon members of the new party to join the unions that were supported by the masses of the workers in their industries and to fight there for genuine working-class policies.

By maintaining the unity of

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch06.htm#27>

Communist organization while rejecting the long-established practice of war against the craft unions, the constituent convention took the first great stride toward making Marxism-Leninism a force for the unification and the political development of the Canadian working class.<sup>19</sup>

The Communist Party of Canada has refined this general strategy towards the organized labour movement throughout the decades and in changing circumstances. It has always fought for a united movement, even through the years of the Workers' Unity League, which was a Communist-led trade union federation formed to combat craft unionism that existed in Canada from 1930-35, eventually encouraging its members to join and build the Congress of Industrial Unions (CIO). However, the unity that is necessary cannot be built by allowing class collaboration to lead. Real unity can only be built through class struggle by a sovereign and independent trade union movement.

The Communist Party of Canada works in all unions where it has members. As the CPC constitution states: "Party members shall belong to the respective trade union to which they are eligible, further its interests and fight consistently to uphold and promote trade union democracy. Where no trade union exists Party members shall work consistently for the promotion of trade union organization, principles and standards".<sup>20</sup>

While we strive to lead the trade union movement and other people's movements we do not attempt to turn trade unions into vanguard organizations. However, we do fight for a labour movement that breaks with class collaborationism. The

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/sections/canada/buck-tim/30years/ch01.htm>

<sup>20</sup> <https://communist-party.ca/constitution/>

CPC Program outlines what we fight for in terms of organization and ideology in the labour movement in detail:

To combat the power of big business and the transnationals, the trade union movement must become sovereign, independent, and united, with the highest level of coordinated strategy and action. A sovereign trade union movement is one whose affiliates are Canadian or Quebec unions, or, in the case of US-based 'international' unions, whose members in Canada have autonomy and control over their affairs, including independent political action. Canadian autonomy is a step on the way to achieving full sovereignty. Independence means freedom from the control of employers. Sovereignty and independence are the conditions for a truly united and militant trade union movement, governed by the principle "an injury to one is an injury to all," at all times placing the interests of the movement as a whole above the sectional interests of individual affiliates. It must oppose raiding, and resolve jurisdictional disputes in the interests of affected workers and the movement as a whole.

... To win the trade union movement for such a fighting program, right-wing policies of class collaboration and betrayal of labour's interests must be challenged and replaced with policies of consistent class struggle. The struggle against opportunism, collaboration, competition, and betrayal is an essential fight for trade union democracy, expansion, survival, and unity of the working class as a whole. Communists in the trade union movement are historically dedicated to this struggle and work to uphold the best, militant trade union principles and maximum democratic involvement in decision-making.<sup>21</sup>

21 [https://communist-party.ca/chapter-5-the-working-class-and-peoples-struggle/#for\\_a\\_sov-ereign\\_united\\_and\\_independent\\_trade\\_union](https://communist-party.ca/chapter-5-the-working-class-and-peoples-struggle/#for_a_sov-ereign_united_and_independent_trade_union)

Discussion questions on "Should Communists work in reformist trade unions" section:

1. What is the criteria membership for a Communist Party as opposed to a mass organization or movement? Why is it necessary to have broad mass organizations? Why is a vanguard Party necessary and how should it interact with mass movements?
2. How do today's right-wing business unionist leaderships and ultra-leftist tendencies inside the labour movement help perpetuate each other and cause disunity?

## Should Communists run in bourgeois elections?

Lenin's answer to this question that still circulates amongst revolutionaries was a definite "yes" in the vast majority of political situations. He begins Chapter 7, "Should We Participate in Bourgeois Parliaments?", by discussing the claim by German ultra-leftists that parliamentary forms of struggle have become "politically and historically obsolete".

In 1920, the Soviet system of workers' democracy had replaced the Russian parliament, called the "Duma", and the state had taken a new form under worker and peasant control. Other Soviets, or workers' councils, had been important organs of revolutionary power in other countries after the war, notably Germany and Hungary. Some evidence that bourgeois democracy had reached its limits was perhaps more available in 1920 than one hundred years later. Nevertheless, Lenin did not agree that bourgeois parliamentarianism was going to die in the near future, and history showed him to be correct. He answers the German "Lefts" forcefully:

Parliamentarianism has become "historically obsolete". That is true

[movement](#)

in the propaganda sense. However, everybody knows that this is still a far cry from overcoming it in *practice*. Capitalism could have been declared—and with full justice—to be “historically obsolete” many decades ago, but that does not at all remove the need for a very long and very persistent struggle *on the basis* of capitalism.

... It is obvious that parliamentarianism in Germany is *not yet* politically obsolete. It is obvious that the “Lefts” in Germany have mistaken *their desire*, their politico-ideological attitude, for objective reality... [W]e must *not* regard what is obsolete *to us* as something obsolete *to a class, to the masses*. Here again we find that the “Lefts” do not know how to reason, do not know how to act as the party of a *class*, as the party of the *masses*. You must not sink to the level of the masses, to the level of the backward strata of the class. That is incontestable. You must tell them the bitter truth. You are duty bound to call their bourgeois-democratic and parliamentary prejudices what they are—prejudices. But at the same time you must *soberly* follow the *actual state of the class-consciousness and preparedness of the entire class* (not only of its communist vanguard), and of all the *working people* (not only of their advanced elements).

... participation in parliamentary elections and in the struggle on the parliamentary rostrum is *obligatory* on the party of the revolutionary proletariat *specifically* for the purpose of educating the backward strata of *its own class*, and for the purpose of awakening and enlightening the undeveloped, downtrodden and ignorant rural *masses*. Whilst you lack the strength to do away with bourgeois parliaments and every other type of reactionary institution, you *must* work within them because *it is there* that you will still find workers who are duped by the priests and stultified by

the conditions of rural life; otherwise you risk turning into nothing but windbags.<sup>22</sup>

Here Lenin insists that subjective desires be ignored and that the Communist movement have an honest appraisal of the objective reality. It is true that in the big picture Lenin was living in the historical era of the transition from capitalism to socialism on a world scale. That is true today as well, despite setbacks in the revolutionary process over the last 40 years. However, understanding this big picture reality can't be used to conclude that we are living in a revolutionary moment here in Canada and consequently that we should think we have the power to immediately create alternatives to bourgeois institutions. Therefore, our tactics must include the parliamentary struggle, or else that arena, which the masses still participate in, becomes entirely uncontested.

Although Russia had transcended bourgeois parliaments, Lenin goes on to explain that the Russian experience has shown the tactical utility of participating in them. Even on the eve of the October Revolution in Russia, the Bolsheviks decided to participate in the Constituent Assembly. Lenin writes, “In September–November 1917, did we, the Russian Bolsheviks, not have *more* right than any Western Communists to consider that parliamentarianism was politically obsolete in Russia?... Nevertheless, the Bolsheviks did *not* boycott the Constituent Assembly, but took part in the elections both before *and after* the proletariat conquered political power.”<sup>23</sup> The next year, when Soviet power was consolidated and the Constituent Assembly (a bourgeois parliament)

22 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch07.htm>

23 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch07.htm>

was defeated, Lenin said the Bolshevik deputies in the Assembly helped demonstrate to the masses that the Assembly was “obsolete”.

Today, there are still many “revolutionaries” that argue against participation in bourgeois elections. The arguments against participation today are less based on the mistaken belief that Soviet governments are just around the corner, but instead point to the consistent betrayals of Social Democratic politicians, or politicians in general. Social movementism, rising in popularity during the height of the anti-globalization movement, tries to answer these betrayals by claiming that parties and parliaments are nothing and movements are everything. There is often some symbiotic relationship between social democratic and anarchist ideas which both divorce the extra-parliamentary struggle from the parliamentary struggle. Communists have the broader view that mass struggle largely determines the terrain that parliamentary struggle plays out on. That doesn't mean we should be deterministic and ignore parliament. Lenin is clear that “action by the masses, a big strike, for instance, is more important than parliamentary activity at *all* times, and not only during a revolution or in a revolutionary situation.” However, extra-parliamentary mass action does not replace the need for parliamentary struggle.

Other ultra-leftist critics resort to moral arguments about the nature of the Canadian state in order to paint parties and candidates as collaborators or they seek to confuse electoral participation with electoralism. Communists would probably agree about the nature of the Canadian state and the limits of bourgeois democracy. As the Communist Party of Canada says at the beginning of our

Program: “Under capitalism, democratic practices and institutions are stripped of most of their real content. Capitalist “democracy” guarantees the right of the capitalist class to dominate the economy and society and to exploit the people.”<sup>24</sup> However moralism cannot replace the appraisal of the objective conditions necessary to determine our tactics.

In the last decade or so in Canada, the Maoist “Revolutionary Communist Party” (RCP) has been the most vocal ultra-left critic of Communist participation in elections. Both splinter groups claiming ownership over the RCP share a common program which states:

Concerning revisionist organizations, such as those of the Communist Party of Canada who think that they can wrest power out of the hands of the bourgeoisie and build the proletarian state by using bourgeois institutions (let's say by getting the people to vote in a handful of communist MPs), the latter allying themselves with a few “socialists” and “enlightened Liberals” in order to form a progressive majority in parliament, well, history speaks for itself!

An ever-growing numbers of Canadian proletarians reject the parliamentary system. They see it as it is: a pitiful circus in which the only way people can participate is by helping create the illusion that it is a democratic process, but in which they are not able to bring any real change to society. Elections are nothing more than an occasion to choose our favourite bloodsucking oppressors.

We, revolutionary communists, declare: **Boycott the elections! Down with bourgeois parliamentarism!**<sup>25</sup>

All comrades who have gone door-

24 <https://communist-party.ca/chapter-1-our-aim-is-socialism/>

25 <http://www.pccrcp.ca/en/1147>

to-door, leafletted, rallied or attended candidate debates during an election know that workers are more receptive to listening and discussing the political situation at this time. This is because, for better or for worse, millions of working people dial in to politics during bourgeois elections at the current time. Our tactical approach is proven correct in every election, despite limited immediate results in the current period.

It is clear that our approach is consistent with Leninist strategies and tactics. Lenin himself said:

Tactics must be based on a sober and strictly objective appraisal of *all* the class forces in a particular state (and of the states that surround it, and of all states the world over) as well as of the experience of revolutionary movements. It is very easy to show one's "revolutionary" temper merely by hurling abuse at parliamentary opportunism, or merely by repudiating participation in parliaments; its very ease, however, cannot turn this into a solution of a difficult, a very difficult, problem... To attempt to "circumvent" this difficulty by "skipping" the arduous job of utilising reactionary parliaments for revolutionary purposes is absolutely childish. You want to create a new society, yet you fear the difficulties involved in forming a good parliamentary group made up of convinced, devoted and heroic Communists, in a reactionary parliament! Is that not childish? ... It is because, in Western Europe, the backward masses of the workers and—to an even greater degree—of the small peasants are much more imbued with bourgeois-democratic and parliamentary prejudices than they were in Russia because of that, it is *only* from within such institutions as bourgeois parliaments that Communists can (and must) wage a long and persistent struggle,

undaunted by any difficulties, to expose, dispel and overcome these prejudices.<sup>26</sup>

For us it is a necessary part of the broader struggle to work to form "a good parliamentary group made up of convinced, devoted and heroic Communists". However, it is not our end goal to elect members of parliament. It is a tactic to advance the broader class struggle and expose the limits of bourgeois democracy. This is what separates us from social democratic electoralism. Social democratic parties, with the NDP being a prime example, often reject discipline from the party towards their parliamentary caucus. While the membership of the party may be allowed to pass progressive policies at conventions of the party, it is the leader or caucus that presents different policies during elections or in parliament based on opportunist triangulations. The social democratic fear of Leninist party discipline results in a dictatorship of a small number of opportunist leaders who have a material interest in sacrificing anything to maintain parliamentary "power". Communists should work in a fundamentally different way in the same institutions. It's not easy to win and build a disciplined Communist parliamentary group that can act as a tribune of the working class and oppressed people, but it's necessary. As Lenin says:

Criticism—the most keen, ruthless and uncompromising criticism—should be directed, not against parliamentarianism or parliamentary activities, but against those leaders who are unable—and still more against those who are *unwilling*—to utilise parliamentary elections and the parliamentary rostrum in a revolutionary and communist manner.

26 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch07.htm>

Only such criticism—combined, of course, with the dismissal of incapable leaders and their replacement by capable ones—will constitute useful and fruitful revolutionary work that will simultaneously train the “leaders” to be worthy of the working class and of all working people, and train the masses to be able properly to understand the political situation and the often very complicated and intricate tasks that spring from that situation.<sup>27</sup>

Later on in Lenin’s “Several Conclusions” chapter, he comes back to how Communists can create a new “Communist type of work” while campaigning during bourgeois elections:

Communists, adherents of the Third International in all countries, exist for the purpose of *changing* — all along the line, in all spheres of life—the old socialist, trade unionist, syndicalist, and parliamentary type of work into a *new* type of work, the communist... In Western Europe and in America, the Communist must learn to create a new, uncustomary, non-opportunist, and non-careerist parliamentarianism; the Communist parties must issue their slogans; true proletarians, with the help of the unorganised and downtrodden poor, should distribute leaflets, canvass workers’ houses and cottages of the rural proletarians and peasants in the remote villages (fortunately there are many times fewer remote villages in Europe than in Russia, and in Britain the number is very small); they should go into the public houses, penetrate into unions, societies and chance gatherings of the common people, and speak to the people, not in learned (or very parliamentary) language, they should not at all strive to “get seats” in parliament, but should everywhere try to get people to think,

and draw the masses into the struggle, to take the bourgeoisie at its word and utilise the machinery it has set up, the elections it has appointed, and the appeals it has made to the people; they should try to explain to the people what Bolshevism is, in a way that was never possible (under bourgeois rule) outside of election times (exclusive, of course, of times of big strikes, when in Russia a *similar* apparatus for widespread popular agitation worked even more intensively). It is very difficult to do this in Western Europe and extremely difficult in America, but it can and must be done, for the objectives of communism cannot be achieved without effort. We must work to accomplish *practical* tasks, ever more varied and ever more closely connected with all branches of social life, winning branch after branch, and sphere after sphere *from the bourgeoisie*.<sup>28</sup>

Discussion questions on “Should Communists run in bourgeois elections?” section:

1. In what ways do anarchist and social democratic ideas about the relationship between movements and political parties align and differ?
2. What symptoms of electoralism are social democratic parties (NDP & QS) exhibiting in Canada and Quebec today?

## The necessity of political alliances

In Chapter 8, “No Compromises?”, and Chapter 9, “Left-Wing’ Communism in Great Britain”, Lenin applies the Bolshevik experience of building political alliances to Great Britain and elsewhere. He opens Chapter 8 with a discussion on how to evaluate when compromises are

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch07.htm>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch10.htm>

necessary. Lenin attacks an over-zealous rejection of compromises in general: “Of course, to very young and inexperienced revolutionaries, as well as to petty-bourgeois revolutionaries of even very respectable age and great experience, it seems extremely ‘dangerous’, incomprehensible and wrong to ‘permit compromises’.”<sup>29</sup> Lenin offers the practical example of workers on strike in order to illustrate why compromises are necessary:

Every proletarian—as a result of the conditions of the mass struggle and the acute intensification of class antagonisms he lives among—sees the difference between a compromise enforced by objective conditions (such as lack of strike funds, no outside support, starvation and exhaustion)—a compromise which in no way minimises the revolutionary devotion and readiness to carry on the struggle on the part of the workers who have agreed to such a compromise—and, on the other hand, a compromise by traitors who try to ascribe to objective causes their self-interest (strike-breakers also enter into “compromises”!), their cowardice, desire to toady to the capitalists, and readiness to yield to intimidation, sometimes to persuasion, sometimes to sops, and sometimes to flattery from the capitalists.

... Of course, in politics, where it is sometimes a matter of extremely complex relations—national and international—between classes and parties, very many cases will arise that will be much more difficult than the question of a legitimate “compromise” in a strike or a treacherous “compromise” by a strike-breaker, treacherous leader, etc. It would be absurd to formulate a recipe or general rule (“No compromises!”)

to suit all cases. One must use one’s own brains and be able to find one’s bearings in each particular instance. It is, in fact, one of the functions of a party organisation and of party leaders worthy of the name, to acquire, through the prolonged, persistent, variegated and comprehensive efforts of all thinking representatives of a given class, the knowledge, experience and—in addition to knowledge and experience—the political flair necessary for the speedy and correct solution of complex political problems.<sup>30</sup>

Communists cannot rely on recipes or cut and dried formulas to determine when a retreat is either necessary or an opportunist mistake. Instead, Lenin demands that we develop cadres that are able to grapple with complex political problems and point the way forward. It is absolutely necessary to know when to end a strike, an occupation, or any other strategy, in order to extract the biggest advances possible and minimize any steps back. A “unlimited general strike up-to revolution” strategy is not helpful or serious. In any struggle, the bosses, reactionary governments or political forces are always looking for a way to divide and conquer. Often they employ a strategy of trying to provoke a battle on a terrain that may be advantageous to them. To run into a trap like this willingly would be a form of “adventurism”.

It is folly, not revolutionism, to deprive ourselves in advance of any freedom of action, openly to inform an enemy who is at present better armed than we are whether we shall fight him, and when. To accept battle at a time when it is obviously advantageous to the enemy, but not to us, is criminal; political leaders of the revolutionary class are absolutely useless if they are incapable of “changing tack, or

29 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch08.htm>

30 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch08.htm>

offering conciliation and compromise” in order to take evasive action in a patently disadvantageous battle.<sup>31</sup>

Lenin then raises the question of compromises with other political parties in order to create alliances. He focuses in on the German “Lefts” who write that “all compromise with other parties . . . any policy of manoeuvring and compromise must be emphatically rejected.” Lenin returns to the history of struggle in Russia and a clear headed understanding of what revolutionaries are up against:

It is surprising that, with such views, these Lefts do not emphatically condemn Bolshevism! After all, the German Lefts cannot but know that the entire history of Bolshevism, both before and after the October Revolution, is *full* of instances of changes of tack, conciliatory tactics and compromises with other parties, including bourgeois parties!

To carry on a war for the overthrow of the international bourgeoisie, a war which is a hundred times more difficult, protracted and complex than the most stubborn of ordinary wars between states, and to renounce in advance any change of tack, or any utilisation of a conflict of interests (even if temporary) among one’s enemies, or any conciliation or compromise with possible allies (even if they are temporary, unstable, vacillating or conditional allies)—is that not ridiculous in the extreme?<sup>32</sup>

Lenin goes on to outline the political alliances of the Bolshevik Party: a 1901-02 formal alliance with bourgeois liberal Struve against Tsarism, alliances with the opportunist Menshevik Party inside a single Social-Democratic Party prior to 1912, and various alliances with the petty-bourgeois peasant Socialist-

31 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch08.htm>

32 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch08.htm>

Revolutionary Party before and after the October Revolution. In each of these alliances the Bolsheviks maintained “relentless ideological and political struggle” against the various other political forces inside the working class movement, while defending an alliance with bourgeois democrats against Tsarism and defending the alliance of the working class and peasantry against bourgeois liberalism and Tsarism. The general strategy that can be seen here is to isolate and defeat the right with the broadest possible unity, while maintaining ideological independence and holding on to the goal of socialism.

Lenin is demonstrating here that it is possible to have more than one kind of alliance simultaneously. Communists need to be clearheaded in their thinking around alliances asking themselves which allies are necessary for which demands. Is this a short term alliance, or a long term alliance? It should be noted that it is sometimes even necessary for Communists to create alliances with sections of the bourgeoisie as demonstrated by the global struggle against fascism in the 1930s and 40s. However, it would of course be a major right opportunist mistake to think that such an alliance is necessary when fascism is not the main enemy.

Lenin points to the make up of capitalist society itself in order to explain the necessity of alliances that represent various sections of the working class, peasantry and petty-bourgeoisie:

... Capitalism would not be capitalism if the proletariat *pur sang* were not surrounded by a large number of exceedingly motley types intermediate between the proletarian and the semi-proletarian (who earns his livelihood in part by the sale of his labour-power), between the semi-proletarian and the small peasant (and

petty artisan, handicraft worker and small master in general), between the small peasant and the middle peasant, and so on, and if the proletariat itself were not divided into more developed and less developed strata, if it were not divided according to territorial origin, trade, sometimes according to religion, and so on. From all this follows the necessity, the absolute necessity, for the Communist Party, the vanguard of the proletariat, its class-conscious section, to resort to changes of tack, to conciliation and compromises with the various groups of proletarians, with the various parties of the workers and small masters. It is entirely a matter of *knowing how* to apply these tactics in order to *raise*—not lower—the *general* level of proletarian class-consciousness, revolutionary spirit, and ability to fight and win... The petty-bourgeois democrats (including the Mensheviks) inevitably vacillate between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, between bourgeois democracy and the Soviet system, between reformism and revolutionism, between love for the workers and fear of the proletarian dictatorship, etc. The Communists' proper tactics should consist in *utilising* these vacillations, not ignoring them; utilising them calls for concessions to elements that are turning towards the proletariat—whenever and in the measure that they turn towards the proletariat—in addition to fighting those who turn towards the bourgeoisie.<sup>33</sup>

Lenin's strategy of "utilising vacillations" and offering concessions to elements that are turning towards the working-class tells us something about how to approach alliances with social democrats. This is a major question across Canada as the labour movement, and many other people's movements, are led by social democratic ideology and by social

democrats. The CPC's Program speaks about the necessity of defeating *social democracy* while also recognizing the need to form alliances with *social democrats*.

The main political expression of reformist ideology and class collaboration within the labour movement in Canada is social democracy. The history of social democracy in Canada, especially since 1945, is intertwined with vicious anti-communism and class collaboration, with aspirations to rule on behalf of capital. That is the fatal flaw of social democracy, and it cannot be rectified by new incarnations of social reformism...

...Nonetheless, the main obstacle to the unity of the workers' movement, to the uniting of the progressive forces and to the establishment of anti-monopoly unity is right-wing social democracy and anti-communism.

The Communist Party has continually worked to unite the reformist and revolutionary wings of the working class movement in the struggle for peace, democracy, and Canadian independence, and against corporate rule.

However, capitalism's deepening crisis, and the resulting intensified struggle between capital and labour, is evoking a deep-going ideological and political clash within the ranks of social democracy. The right-wing leadership of the social democratic movement in Canada and internationally has abandoned the goal of "socialism" entirely, embraced globalized capitalism, and reoriented social democratic parties in favour of the illusion of managing capitalism "with a human face..."

...These developments attest to the widening gap between the interests of the working class and those of right-wing social democracy.

33 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch08.htm>

In the day-to-day struggle, Communists work closely with left-wing social democrats and other activists in the labour and progressive movements, and strive to develop united action and cooperation. The Communist Party continues to work for cooperation with the NDP around common issues and reforms, despite the widening gulf between the principles and class allegiance of the two parties. In the same way in Quebec, the Communist Party works for cooperation with Quebec Solidaire, a left-wing and pro-independence social democratic party.

The more effectively the Communist Party works for left and democratic unity and strengthens its independent political activity, putting forward its Marxist-Leninist program and policies, the more the left forces, both within and outside the NDP, can be brought into united struggle for genuine progressive policies.<sup>34</sup>

Lenin and the CPC's Program recognize the need for alliances between revolutionaries and reformists in non-revolutionary periods in order to advance popular struggles. We must offer some "conciliation" and "compromise" in order to build these alliances, in order to "raise—not lower—the *general* level of proletarian class-consciousness, revolutionary spirit, and ability to fight and win". To reject alliances on principle is sectarian. However it is also true that sacrificing the ideological independence of the Communist Party is opportunist and will lower class consciousness in the long-term.

In Chapter 9, "Left-Wing' Communism in Great Britain", Lenin provides a concrete case study for building political alliances. The example used is that of Britain,

where the Liberal Prime Minister of the time, Lloyd George, was advocating an alliance with the Conservative Party, in order to block the rise of the social democratic Labour Party. George used inflammatory red-baiting in order to try and galvanize bourgeois unity against social democracy. Lenin quotes George at length:

Lloyd George argued that a coalition—and a *close* coalition at that—between the Liberals and the Conservatives was essential, otherwise there might be a victory for the Labour Party, which Lloyd George prefers to call "Socialist" and which is working for the "common ownership" of the means of production. "It is . . . known as communism in France," the leader of the British bourgeoisie said, putting it popularly for his audience, Liberal M.P.s who probably never knew it before. In Germany it was called socialism, and in Russia it is called Bolshevism, he went on to say. To Liberals this is unacceptable on principle, Lloyd George explained, because they stand in principle for private property. "Civilisation is in jeopardy," the speaker declared, and consequently Liberals and Conservatives must unite. . . .<sup>35</sup>

Despite this potential unity of the bourgeois parties, the leftists in the Communist Party that was in the process of being formed were arguing against any alliances on principle. Lenin quotes Sylvia Pankhurst as writing: "The Communist Party must not compromise. . . . The Communist Party must keep its doctrine pure, and its independence of reformism inviolate, its mission is to lead the way, without stopping or turning, by the direct road to the communist revolution."<sup>36</sup>

34 <http://communist-party.ca/chapter-5-the-working-class-and-peoples-struggle/>

35 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch09.htm>

36 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch09.htm>

Lenin agrees that the Labour Party leadership, which he refers to as the “Hendersons and Snowdens”, the names of their leaders, are “hopelessly reactionary” and he says that they “want to ‘rule’ along the old bourgeois lines.” But Lenin also says that it does not follow that any support for them “means treachery to the revolution.” He writes that “in the interests of the revolution, working-class revolutionaries should give these gentlemen a certain amount of parliamentary support.” Later, Lenin writes:

...British Communists *should* participate in parliamentary action, that they should, from *within* parliament, help the masses of the workers see the results of a Henderson and Snowden government in practice, and that they should help the Hendersons and Snowdens defeat the united forces of Lloyd George and Churchill. To act otherwise would mean hampering the cause of the revolution, since revolution is impossible without a change in the views of the majority of the working class, a change brought about by the political experience of the masses, never by propaganda alone.<sup>37</sup>

So how would Communists concretely create an alliance with the Labour Party in this situation, so as to not tail behind social democracy? How would Communists ensure that they are raising class consciousness and not lowering it? Lenin has this specific proposal:

The Communist Party should propose the following “compromise” election agreement to the Hendersons and Snowdens: let us jointly fight against the alliance between Lloyd George and the Conservatives; let us share parliamentary seats in proportion to the number of workers’ votes polled for the Labour Party and for the Communist Party (not in elections,

but in a special ballot), and let us retain *complete freedom* of agitation, propaganda and political activity. Of course, without this latter condition, we cannot agree to a bloc, for that would be treachery; the British Communists must demand and get complete freedom to expose the Hendersons and the Snowdens in the same way as (*for fifteen years—1903–17*) the Russian Bolsheviks demanded and got it in respect of the Russian Hendersons and Snowdens, i.e., the Mensheviks.<sup>38</sup>

Lenin is advancing a particular electoral alliance tactic that he thinks will advance the struggle as a whole. He is trying to find a way to isolate the bourgeois parties through an alliance with Labour, while also winning left-wing elements in the Labour Party to the Communist Party’s position. If Communists adopted the position that all political parties besides the Communist Party are “the same”, then it would be impossible to advance any alliances. Communists must understand both the similarities and the differences of Parties and the classes or sections of classes they represent. On the level of “pure communism” capitalist parties are all the same. However, Communists can’t stop there. Lenin writes:

The differences between the Churchills [Conservatives] and the Lloyd Georges [Liberals] —with insignificant national distinctions, these political types exist in *all* countries—on the one hand, and between the Hendersons [Social Democrats] and the Lloyd Georges [Liberals] on the other, are quite minor and unimportant from the standpoint of pure (i.e., abstract) communism, i.e., communism that has not yet matured to the stage of practical political action by the masses. However, from the standpoint of this practical action by the masses, these

37 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch09.htm>

38 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch09.htm>

differences are most important. To take due account of these differences, and to determine the moment when the inevitable conflicts between these “friends”, which weaken and enfeeble *all the “friends” taken together*, will have come to a head—that is the concern, the task, of a Communist who wants to be, not merely a class-conscious and convinced propagandist of ideas, but a practical leader of the *masses* in the revolution.<sup>39</sup>

In Canada today, the CPC is not in any electoral alliance at a federal level. However, for many decades the CPC did work to try and enter into an alliance with the CCF, and later the NDP. The NDP’s anti-communism made this impossible. The Parti Communiste du Quebec (PCQ) does have recent experience in helping to found the Union des forces progressistes (UFP), a coalition that became Quebec Solidaire, a Quebec party that the PCQ left in 2018. The CPC has been involved in several municipal reform movements with social democrats and others over the years as well.

For now, electoral alliances are less frequent than alliances inside the labour and people’s movements. These are important in order to build unity in the working class fight back. The CPC Program is clear on its rejection of sectarianism and understands the necessity of unity:

Communists strive to strengthen the unity in action of all of the labour, progressive and democratic forces. The Communist Party seeks cooperation with other organizations in the labour and democratic movements and promotes the development of broad coalitions, alliances and united front formations that defend and advance the interests of the working class and the social, economic and democratic rights of the

Canadian people. Building alliances increases the material strength of the working people and illustrates that the particular oppression a group of workers feel is part of a broader pattern of capitalist oppression that affects all working people. It illustrates the relationship of those classes and groups to one another and to the state. It helps working people to respond to other cases of capitalist oppression. It teaches working people to learn how to work with other classes and groups. In other words, it helps to create the basis for working class leadership of society as a whole.

At the same time, the CPC maintains its ideological, political and organizational independence. It explains its program openly among the people, putting forward the necessity and timeliness of socialist transformation.<sup>40</sup>

It is our main task to build unity and solidarity in the movements where we are active.

Lenin goes on to explain that alliances are necessary even after a socialist revolution in a country that is building socialism. Keep in mind that the Russian Communist Party would advance the New Economic Policy (NEP) a year later in 1921, making major concessions to small capital and a free market in order to increase production. Lenin makes it clear that the revolutionary transfer of power to the working class does not mean that Communists can dispense with alliances and compromises:

After the first socialist revolution of the proletariat, and the overthrow of the bourgeoisie in some country, the proletariat of that country remains *for a long time weaker* than the bourgeoisie, simply because of the latter’s extensive international links, and also because of the spontaneous and continuous

39 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch09.htm>

40 <http://communist-party.ca/chapter-8-the-communist-party/>

restoration and regeneration of capitalism and the bourgeoisie by the small commodity producers of the country which has overthrown the bourgeoisie. The more powerful enemy can be vanquished only by exerting the utmost effort, and by the most thorough, careful, attentive, skilful and *obligatory* use of any, even the smallest, rift between the enemies, any conflict of interests among the bourgeoisie of the various countries and among the various groups or types of bourgeoisie within the various countries, and also by taking advantage of any, even the smallest, opportunity of winning a mass ally, even though this ally is temporary, vacillating, unstable, unreliable and conditional. Those who do not understand this reveal a failure to understand even the smallest grain of Marxism, of modern scientific socialism *in general*. Those who have not proved *in practice*, over a fairly considerable period of time and in fairly varied political situations, their ability to apply this truth in practice have not yet learned to help the revolutionary class in its struggle to emancipate all toiling humanity from the exploiters. And this applies equally to the period *before* and *after* the proletariat has won political power.<sup>41</sup>

The USSR was obviously not the only socialist country that decided it needed to make economic and political concessions. Whether these decisions were necessary in order to advance socialism, or were unnecessary retreats and are in fact betrayals of socialism, need careful and rigorous examination that cannot be done in this study guide. However, it is safe to say that many ultra-left voices today do not examine alliances and compromises by looking at the objective conditions and the balance of class forces, but instead measure socialist societies against the ideal image of socialism in the

abstract. In these cases, the ultra-left ends up attacking revolutionary governments in the name of revolution, often siding with imperialist voices, governments and organizations. As Lenin writes in Chapter 6: “We can (and must) begin to build socialism, not with abstract human material, or with human material specially prepared by us, but with the human material bequeathed to us by capitalism. True, that is no easy matter, but no other approach to this task is serious enough to warrant discussion.”<sup>42</sup>

Ultra-leftist condemnation of existing socialist countries is intertwined to the tendency to imagine we can ignore necessary democratic transformations and leap over the struggle to build socialism directly into communism. The Communist Party of Canada’s Program advances the building of a “democratic, anti-monopoly, anti-imperialist alliance” that would eventually be able to form a “people’s government” in order to break the “stranglehold of finance capital”. This would “open the door to socialism” but would not constitute socialism itself. Whereas ultra-left groups tend to ignore the complicated process of building socialism and see “the Revolution” as something happening in a very short period of time, our Program points out that “retreats” may be necessary depending on the balance of class forces.

The revolutionary transformation to socialism will mark the absolute transfer of power from the capitalist class to the working class together with its allies. This process will be influenced by both domestic and external conditions and developments. The pace and character of this transformation will be determined by the unity and resolve of the working class and its closest allies at decisive junctures, and the capacity of the

41 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch08.htm>

42 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch06.htm>

progressive and revolutionary forces to frustrate and curtail counter-revolutionary activity which violates democracy and the rule of law...

...Although capitalism prepares the material prerequisites, socialism does not develop spontaneously, but must be built in a prolonged struggle against the old and for the new. Immediately on its establishment, the workers' state will undertake the task of organizing and leading, step by step, the transition of Canada to socialism.

It cannot be said today through just what stages this historical process will have to pass, or that it will involve only advances and no retreats. The pace at which socialist construction can proceed will depend on the democratic will and class struggle of the Canadian workers and people generally, and on the strength of the resistance put up by the capitalist exploiters, as well as on the international context.<sup>43</sup>

#### Discussion questions on “the necessity of political alliances” section:

1. What are some strikes or occupations that you have been involved in or followed closely? When would it have been a mistake to end the action, vs. when would it have been a mistake to continue?
2. How can Lenin insist on the need for alliances with social democrats while also calling social democracy the Bolshevism's principal enemy within the working-class movement?

## On revolutionary strategy

In Chapter 10 of the book, “Several Conclusions”, Lenin makes some broad observations about leftism as an obstacle to developing a clear revolutionary

43 <https://communist-party.ca/chapter-7-building-socialism/>

strategy. Lenin is arguing that the revolutionary mood of individuals, the readiness of the working class vanguard, or even a revolutionary attitude of the whole working people, does not determine a revolutionary political moment alone. Back in Chapter 9, Lenin describes his “law of revolution”:

The fundamental law of revolution, which has been confirmed by all revolutions and especially by all three Russian revolutions in the twentieth century, is as follows: for a revolution to take place it is not enough for the exploited and oppressed masses to realise the impossibility of living in the old way, and demand changes; for a revolution to take place it is essential that the exploiters should not be able to live and rule in the old way. It is only when the “*lower classes*” do not want to live in the old way and the “*upper classes*” cannot carry on in the old way that the revolution can triumph. This truth can be expressed in other words: revolution is impossible without a nation-wide crisis (affecting both the exploited and the exploiters). It follows that, for a revolution to take place, it is essential, first, that a majority of the workers (or at least a majority of the class-conscious, thinking, and politically active workers) should fully realise that revolution is necessary, and that they should be prepared to die for it; second, that the ruling classes should be going through a governmental crisis, which draws even the most backward masses into politics (symptomatic of any genuine revolution is a rapid, tenfold and even hundredfold increase in the size of the working and oppressed masses—hitherto apathetic—who are capable of waging the political struggle), weakens the government, and makes it possible for the revolutionaries to rapidly overthrow it.<sup>44</sup>

44 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch09.htm>

When conditions are ripe, when working people do not want to live under capitalism, and the capitalists and their state cannot “carry on in the old way”, then the leadership of a vanguard party is a necessity in leading the revolution to victory. Lenin writes in more detail about the Communist Party’s role in a revolutionary situation in Chapter 10:

In these circumstances, one must not count in thousands, like the propagandist belonging to a small group that has not yet given leadership to the masses; in these circumstances one must count in millions and tens of millions. In these circumstances, we must ask ourselves, not only whether we have convinced the vanguard of the revolutionary class, but also whether the historically effective forces of *all* classes—positively of all the classes in a given society, without exception—are arrayed in such a way that the decisive battle is at hand—in such a way that: (1) all the class forces hostile to us have become sufficiently entangled, are sufficiently at loggerheads with each other, have sufficiently weakened themselves in a struggle which is beyond their strength; (2) all the vacillating and unstable, intermediate elements—the petty bourgeoisie and the petty-bourgeois democrats, as distinct from the bourgeoisie—have sufficiently exposed themselves in the eyes of the people, have sufficiently disgraced themselves through their practical bankruptcy, and (3) among the proletariat, a mass sentiment favouring the most determined, bold and dedicated revolutionary action against the bourgeoisie has emerged and begun to grow vigorously. Then revolution is indeed ripe; then, indeed, if we have correctly gauged all the conditions indicated and summarised above, and if we have chosen the right moment, our victory is assured.<sup>45</sup>

Lenin insists that it is important to distinguish between “revolutionary” and “non-revolutionary” times, in order to determine the correct tactics and to be able to lead the working class towards the final revolutionary struggle. Many on the ultra-left, then and today, do not make any such distinctions and instead distinguish between different tactics as inherently “revolutionary” or “reformist” in all situations. Lenin writes:

Inexperienced revolutionaries often think that legal methods of struggle are opportunist because, in this field, the bourgeoisie has most frequently deceived and duped the workers (particularly in “peaceful” and non-revolutionary times), while illegal methods of struggle are revolutionary. That, however, is wrong. ... But revolutionaries who are incapable of combining illegal forms of struggle with *every* form of legal struggle are poor revolutionaries indeed. It is not difficult to be a revolutionary when revolution has already broken out and is in spate, when all people are joining the revolution just because they are carried away, because it is the vogue, and sometimes even from careerist motives. After its victory, the proletariat has to make most strenuous efforts, even the most painful, so as to “liberate” itself from such pseudo-revolutionaries. It is far more difficult—and far more precious—to be a revolutionary when the conditions for direct, open, really mass and really revolutionary struggle *do not yet exist*, to be able to champion the interests of the revolution (by propaganda, agitation and organisation) in non-revolutionary bodies, and quite often in downright reactionary bodies, in a non-revolutionary situation, among the masses who are incapable of immediately appreciating the need for revolutionary methods of action. To be able to seek, find and correctly determine the specific path or the particular turn of events that will *lead*

45 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch10.htm>

the masses to the real, decisive and final revolutionary struggle—such is the main objective of communism in Western Europe and in America today.<sup>46</sup>

It is the role of the Communist Parties to find the specific path towards socialist revolution in their own countries. Lenin is speaking about the formation of the international Communist movement here and the need to go beyond a simple recognition of the need to fight for socialism and the dictatorship of the proletariat, but also the need to develop unity on a common strategy to win and build a particular vision of socialism. The winning of the vanguard to socialism is an important step, but it is insufficient.

The chief thing—though, of course, far from everything—the chief thing, has already been achieved: the vanguard of the working class has been won over, has ranged itself on the side of Soviet government and against parliamentarianism, on the side of the dictatorship of the proletariat and against bourgeois democracy. All efforts and all attention should now be concentrated on the *next* step, which may seem—and from a certain viewpoint actually is—less fundamental, but, on the other hand, is actually closer to a practical accomplishment of the task. That step is: the search after forms of the *transition* or the *approach* to the proletarian revolution...

... Victory cannot be won with a vanguard alone. To throw only the vanguard into the decisive battle, before the entire class, the broad masses, have taken up a position either of direct support for the vanguard, or at least of sympathetic neutrality towards it and of precluded support for the enemy, would be, not merely

foolish but criminal. Propaganda and agitation alone are not enough for an entire class, the broad masses of the working people, those oppressed by capital, to take up such a stand. For that, the masses must have their own political experience...

...While the first historical objective (that of winning over the class-conscious vanguard of the proletariat to the side of Soviet power and the dictatorship of the working class) could not have been reached without a complete ideological and political victory over opportunism and social-chauvinism, the second and immediate objective, which consists in being able to lead the *masses* to a new position ensuring the victory of the vanguard in the revolution, cannot be reached without the liquidation of Left doctrinairism, and without a full elimination of its errors.

It might be useful to reflect on our own experiences building a vanguard Party in Canada in the 21<sup>st</sup> century here. We are celebrating our Party's centenary in the midst of a severe capitalist crisis with several different expressions: economic, environmental, social and a health crisis. More and more working people are turning towards socialism as the only system that can replace capitalism. However, there is much less unity on the question of how to achieve socialism and the strategy and tactics to get there, even among those that are joining or interested in our Party. It is absolutely necessary to defeat leftist ideas in order to build unity around the CPC's Program, inside and well beyond our Party.

One of the common mistakes of leftism is a form of rigid dogmatism that separates the Party from the rest of the working class. Lenin's solution to this is to emphasize flexibility in tactics, while remaining firm on the movement's

46 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch10.htm>

principles and goals. Flexibility of tactics is most often Lenin's cure to the different forms of "infantile disorders" presented in the book.

In all cases in all countries, communism is becoming steeled and is growing; its roots are so deep that persecution does not weaken or debilitate it but only strengthens it. Only one thing is lacking to enable us to march forward more confidently and firmly to victory, namely, the universal and thorough awareness of all Communists in all countries of the necessity to display the utmost *flexibility* in their tactics. The communist movement, which is developing magnificently, now lacks, especially in the advanced countries, this awareness and the ability to apply it in practice.<sup>47</sup>

Overcoming leftist mistakes that are being made inside the Party and by Party members in the labour and people's movements is just as necessary today as it was one hundred years ago. We must also differentiate between mistakes that are made because of inexperience or confusion as opposed to organized ultra-left groups who purposefully disorganize, disunify and sow confusion. Comradely discussion, criticism and self-criticism are the tools with which we can build ourselves up to avoid these mistakes in the future. We must also have a thorough grasp of these ideas in order to stop the more nefarious organized ultra-left attacks on our movement.

There are new variations of social democracy to contend with such as the "21<sup>st</sup> century socialism" of Latin America and the "democratic socialism" of the Sanders movement. There are also new brands of ultra-leftism that are emerging and will emerge and we need to be able to see them for what they are. Both

on the right and the left, these "new" ideologies will be repackaged versions of old opportunism, since the essential class nature of capitalism today has not changed.

It is our hope that the discussion promoted by this study guide can make a modest contribution towards these ends. Our most decisive task is building the Communist Party in Canada, and an important part of this is a conscious effort to strengthen the whole Party ideologically through organized theory and education work. However, we cannot let ourselves get lost in internal theoretical discussions without connecting this work to our practical political work among working class and oppressed people from coast to coast, on the streets, in schools and in workplaces. It is not Communists alone that will make revolutions, which means we can't allow ourselves to be isolated. To close, Lenin offers us some humbling but inspirational remarks on revolution:

History as a whole, and the history of revolutions in particular, is always richer in content, more varied, more multiform, more lively and ingenious than is imagined by even the best parties, the most class-conscious vanguards of the most advanced classes. This can readily be understood, because even the finest of vanguards express the class-consciousness, will, passion and imagination of tens of thousands, whereas at moments of great upsurge and the exertion of all human capacities, revolutions are made by the class-consciousness, will, passion and imagination of tens of millions, spurred on by a most acute struggle of classes.<sup>48</sup>

47 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch10.htm>

48 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch10.htm>

Discussion questions on “on revolutionary strategy” section:

1. What are some examples of ultra-left formulations around categorizing particular tactics as inherently “revolutionary” or “reformist”?
2. What are some tactical mistakes that we or other comrades have made in the labour and people’s movements?