

Introduction

In 1905, the people of Russia rose up against the autocratic regime of Tsar Nicolas II, who continued his predecessor's opposition to liberal reforms conceded by Tsar Alexander II. Peasants demanded land and debt relief; workers demanded democratic rights and workplace reforms; the empire's non-Russian nationalities denounced the restrictions placed on them under the tsar's policy of 'Russification'. Pro-democracy and anti-monarchist intellectuals of many stripes called for the abolition, or at least the reining-in, of the monarchy.

This was a revolution, but clearly not a socialist one. So what was the role of the working class, and of a revolutionary, working-class, Marxist party like Lenin's Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party? A breakaway group of the RSDLP (the new-Iskra faction) urged the working class to stay on the sidelines. Let the capitalists fight for capitalist democracy, they argued. If the working class were to join bourgeois liberals in the fight against the monarchy, it would lose its political independence, become dissolved in bourgeois politics, and find its hands tied in the struggle against capitalism.

Two Tactics is Lenin's response to those claims. The working class must not only join, but lead the democratic revolution, he says. The fight against the monarchy and for democratic rights cannot be left to the capitalist class. The theoretical heart of the essay is chapter six, presented here in excerpted and edited form.

Although capitalism in the modern United States is immeasurably more developed than in tsarist Russia, there are several noteworthy similarities between our context and Lenin's: a social and economic organization marked by long dependence on forced labor; a reactionary, ultra-nationalist regime backed by conservative religious institutions and militia groups; a broad democratic upsurge including liberal elements from the capitalist class; and an increasingly militant workers' movement. Lenin's key insight—that the fight for democracy can only be won under working class leadership—is a powerful lesson for developing the fight against the Trump regime and opening the path toward socialist revolution.

From which direction is the proletariat threatened with the danger of having its hands tied in the struggle against the inconsistent bourgeoisie?

A bourgeois revolution is *absolutely* necessary in the interests of the proletariat. The more complete and determined, the more consistent the bourgeois revolution, the more assured will be the proletarian struggle against the bourgeoisie for socialism. Only those who are ignorant of the rudiments of scientific socialism can regard this conclusion as new or strange, paradoxical. And from this conclusion, among other things, follows the thesis that, *in a certain sense*, a bourgeois revolution is *more advantageous* to the proletariat than to the bourgeoisie. This thesis is unquestionably correct in the following sense: it is to the advantage of the bourgeoisie to rely on certain remnants of the past as against the proletariat, for instance, on the monarchy, the standing army, etc. It is to the advantage of the bourgeoisie if the bourgeois revolution does not too

resolutely sweep away all the remnants of the past, but leaves some of them, i.e., if this revolution is not fully consistent, if it is not complete and if it is not determined and relentless.

Social-Democrats often express this idea somewhat differently by stating that the bourgeoisie betrays its own self, that the bourgeoisie betrays the cause of liberty, that the bourgeoisie is incapable of being consistently democratic.

It is of greater advantage to the bourgeoisie if the necessary changes in the direction of bourgeois democracy take place more slowly, more gradually, more cautiously, less resolutely, by means of reforms and not by means of revolution; if these changes spare the “venerable” institutions of serfdom (such as the monarchy) as much as possible; if these changes develop as little as possible the independent revolutionary activity, initiative and energy of the common people, i.e., the peasantry and especially the workers. Otherwise it will be easier for the workers, as the French say, “to hitch the rifle from one shoulder to the other,” i.e., to turn against the bourgeoisie the guns which the bourgeois revolution will place in their hands, the liberty which the revolution will bring, the democratic institutions which will spring up on the ground that is cleared of serfdom.

On the other hand, it is more advantageous for the working class if the necessary changes in the direction of bourgeois democracy take place by way of revolution and not by way of reform; for the way of reform is the way of delay, of procrastination, of the painfully slow decomposition of the putrid parts of the national organism. It is the proletariat and the peasantry that suffer first of all and most of all from their putrefaction. The revolutionary way is the way of quick amputation, which is the least painful to the proletariat, the way of the direct removal of the decomposing parts, the way of fewest concessions to and least consideration for the monarchy and the disgusting, vile, rotten and contaminating institutions which go with it.

[...]

The very position the bourgeoisie occupies as a class in capitalist society inevitably causes it to be inconsistent in a democratic revolution. The very position the proletariat occupies as a class compels it to be consistently democratic. The bourgeoisie looks backward, fearing democratic progress, which threatens to strengthen the proletariat. The proletariat has nothing to lose but its chains, but with the aid of democracy it has the whole world to gain. That is why the more consistent the bourgeois revolution is in achieving its democratic changes, the less will it limit itself to what is of advantage exclusively to the bourgeoisie. The more consistent the bourgeois

revolution, the more does it guarantee the proletariat and the peasantry the benefits accruing from the democratic revolution.

Marxism teaches the proletarian not to keep aloof from the bourgeois revolution, not to be indifferent to it, not to allow the leadership of the revolution to be assumed by the bourgeoisie but, on the contrary, to take a most energetic part in it, to fight most resolutely for consistent proletarian democracy, for carrying the revolution to its conclusion. We cannot jump out of the bourgeois-democratic boundaries of the Russian revolution, but we can vastly extend these boundaries, and within these boundaries we can and must fight for the interests of the proletariat, for its immediate needs and for the conditions that will make it possible to prepare its forces for the future complete victory.

There is bourgeois democracy and bourgeois democracy. The monarchist who favors an upper chamber, and who “asks” for universal suffrage while secretly, on the sly, striking a bargain with tsarism for a curtailed constitution, is a bourgeois-democrat. And the peasant who is fighting, arms in hand, against the landlords and the government officials and... proposes “to send the tsar packing”, is also a bourgeois-democrat. There are bourgeois-democratic regimes like the one in Germany and also in England, like the one in Austria and also like those in America or Switzerland. He would be a fine Marxist indeed, who in a period of democratic revolution failed to see the difference between the degrees of democracy, the difference of its various forms and confined himself to “clever” remarks to the effect that, after all, this is “a bourgeois revolution,” the fruits of a “bourgeois revolution.”

[...]

To remove all misinterpretations and misunderstandings, let us first of all note that the danger [of the working class losing its independence] lies not in the subjective, but in the objective aspect of the matter, not in the formal position which Social-Democracy will take in the struggle, but in the material outcome of the entire present revolutionary struggle. The question is not whether this or that Social-Democratic group will want to dissolve in bourgeois democracy or whether they are conscious of the fact that they are merging. Nobody suggests that. We do not suspect any Social-Democrat of harboring such a desire, and this is not at all a question of desires.

Nor is it a question of whether this or that Social-Democratic group will formally retain its separate identity, individuality and independence of bourgeois democracy throughout the course of the revolution. They may not only proclaim such “independence” but even retain it formally, and yet *it may turn out* that their hands will nonetheless be tied in the struggle against the

inconsistency of the bourgeoisie. The final political result of the revolution may prove to be that, in spite of the formal “independence” of Social-Democracy, in spite of its complete organizational individuality as a separate party, it will in fact not be independent, it will not be able to put the imprint of its proletarian independence on the course of events, will prove so weak that, on the whole and in the last analysis, its “dissolving” in the bourgeois democracy will nonetheless be a historical fact.

[...]

From the standpoint of objective conditions there are two possible courses and outcomes of the revolution in Russia. A change in the economic and political system in Russia along bourgeois-democratic lines is inevitable and unavoidable. No power on earth can prevent such a change. But the combined actions of the existing forces which are effecting that change may result in one of two things, may bring about one of two forms of that change. Either 1) the result will be a “decisive victory of the revolution over tsarism,” or 2) the forces will be inadequate for a decisive victory and the matter will end in a deal between tsarism and the most “inconsistent” and most “self-seeking” elements of the bourgeoisie. By and large all the infinite variety of detail and combinations, which no one is able to foresee, lead to one or the other.

Let us now consider these two outcomes, first, from the standpoint of their social significance and, secondly, from the standpoint of the position of Social-Democracy (its “dissolving” or “having its hands tied”) in one or the other case.

What is a “decisive victory of the revolution over tsarism”? [...] Surely, we Marxists must not under any circumstances allow ourselves to be deluded by *words* such as “revolution” or “the great Russian revolution,” as do many revolutionary democrats. We must be perfectly clear in our minds as to what real social forces are opposed to “tsarism” (which is a real force, perfectly intelligible to all) and are capable of gaining a “decisive victory” over it. Such a force cannot be the big bourgeoisie, the landlords, the factory owners... We see that these do not even want a decisive victory. We know that owing to their class position they are incapable of waging a decisive struggle against tsarism; they are too heavily fettered by private property, capital and land to enter into a decisive struggle. They need tsarism with its bureaucratic, police and military forces for use against the proletariat and the peasantry too much to be able to strive for its destruction. No, the only force capable of gaining “a decisive victory over tsarism,” is the people, i.e., the proletariat and the peasantry, if we take the main, big forces and distribute the rural and urban petty bourgeoisie (also part of “the people”) between the two.

