

Our Present Situation and Some Lessons from the International Communist Movement

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The question of the immediate and long-term tasks of Maoists in this country is of pressing importance. Despite the relatively low level of class struggle in this country at present, there are urgent tasks that must be carried out by Maoists if we are to succeed in our goal of making revolution and establishing a socialist society.

At present our movement consists of a few small groups of revolutionaries around the country who are in the process of developing organizations and building ties with the masses.¹ These steps are fundamental and of the utmost importance. However, in carrying them out, we must also work hard to understand and prepare for the tasks which will confront our movement in the future. Through studying the lessons of revolutionary history and analyzing the contradictions of the present movement, we can chart a course from our present state of relative weakness and isolation to the eventual revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist class and beyond. In doing so, we can relate the struggles of the present to the future goals of revolution and communism. As Marx and Engels said:

The Communists fight for the attainment of the immediate aims, for the enforcement of the momentary interests of the working class; but in the movement of the present, they also represent and take care of the future of that movement.

1. The Present Situation Among Various Classes

The present situation in the U.S. is extremely challenging for revolutionaries. We are operating in the most powerful imperialist country in the world, in which there is a very low-level of class struggle. In order to grasp how to advance towards revolution and communism, we must have an understanding of the situation for various different classes in this country. Understanding the general

¹Leaving aside our contemporary Red Army Faction (the partially defunct “Red Guards” movement) and other revisionist trends such as the social-democrats, who, in focusing their organizing effort among the petty-bourgeoisie and in running for elections, reveal themselves as ideologically subordinate to the bourgeoisie in practice, even as they talk about socialism.

trends and contradictions that various classes face at the present moment in this country is essential to developing a correct political line.

There are a small, but growing number of working-class movements, but most remain within the confines of trade-unionist ideology² and as such are easily co-opted by labor-aristocratic unions³ which function as vehicles for bourgeois ideology and work hard to stifle the more advanced and revolutionary ideas in these trade-union movements. Despite these and other challenges, the fundamental situation for working people provides ample opportunities for revolutionary organization. The degree of capitalist exploitation in this country is very high, and relatedly, a large section of the working class is surplus population (as far as the interests of capital are concerned).⁴ These people either exist in some form of semi-employment (i.e. part time work, collecting scrap metal, doing odd jobs) or are forced to rely on various inadequate welfare programs⁵ to eke out a

²This reality is in some senses inevitable without the existence of a large-scale revolutionary movement and a revolutionary organization to bring the light of revolutionary theory to the working class and expose to them the injustices and contradictions of *all aspects* of capitalist-imperialist society. In the course of their normal day-to-day experiences in capitalist production, the working class movements only spontaneously develop trade-unionist ideology, but not communist ideology. We discuss this in greater detail in the next section of the paper.

³These unions have, since late 1940s, been purged of their more radical elements. Instead of functioning as vehicles for working class struggle, they exist as dominantly parasitic entities which claim to represent the interests of the workers, but actually channel them into the dead ends of bourgeois ideology and reformism. Instead of advocating for a revolutionary transformation of society, they typically propagate the bourgeois myth of “a fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay.” However, insofar as the capitalists make their profit off the labor of the working class, there can be no “fair day’s pay” under capitalism, because paying workers the full value that they produce would leave nothing for the capitalists. The vampires would have no blood to suck.

⁴The U.S. state has developed all sorts of “innovations” in how they report statistics such as unemployment. For example, in measuring unemployment they only count those who file for unemployment benefits. This, of necessity, actually represents only a small percentage of those who are without work, because one can only file for unemployment in certain circumstances and under certain conditions. Thus while much of the bourgeois media drones on about how difficult it is for employers to find workers—the bourgeois media never misses a chance to report on how hard things are for the capitalists—the Labor Force Participation Rate provides a more accurate picture of the degree of unemployment in this country. This statistic—which measures the percentage of able-bodied adults who work at least one hour a week—as of December, 2018 is 63.1%, meaning that 36.9% of the labor force does not even work one hour a week. The situation is more dire than this because a significant section of the 62.7% are underemployed and only able to find part-time work and odd jobs. For more data see: <https://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LNS11300000>

⁵Many of the existing welfare programs were created during the Great Depression in response to the mass upsurge of working class struggles and expanded in the 1960s during the upsurge in the Black Liberation struggle and working class movements. Since then they have been systematically rolled back by Democrats and Republicans alike. For example, since the passage of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Act (known as Welfare Reform), people have had to work more than 20 hours a week on average to qualify for more than three months of food stamps (known as the Supplementary Nutritional Assistance Program—SNAP) in a three year period. What’s more, recent changes to SNAP have made cuts to the benefits that people receive. A recent bill also proposed increasing the minimum work requirements to qualify for these benefits. These changes have effectively disqualified a large number of people who previously relied on these welfare programs to be able to eat and

meager existence on the edge of complete destitution and homelessness.⁶ Those who do have the “privilege” of working and being exploited often have to work long hours and multiple jobs just to make ends meet. Thus the basic reforms previously won through class struggle, such as the weekend and the eight-hour workday, do not exist for the majority of the working class.

In our present situation, very little separates most members of the working class from total destitution and pauperism. For example, over 30% of people in this country have a negative net worth, meaning that they have more debt than assets, and 63% of Americans cannot afford an unexpected \$500 expense, meaning they are living a very precarious existence, going paycheck to paycheck. Economic conditions are particularly bad among oppressed nationalities. A 2016 study by the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston found that the median wealth of Black families in the city was a mere \$8.⁷ What’s more, as a number of highly publicized instances of police brutality have recently highlighted, Black people—and the Black working class in particular—are subject to constant harassment

survive, and further changes will only exacerbate the situation.

⁶There is often a lot of confusion about the differences between the lower sections of the reserve army of labor and the lumpen proletariat. Historically, a lack of clarity on these matters has led to real setbacks in revolutionary struggles here in the U.S. It is important to remember what Marx said on this matter:

“Finally, the lowest sediment of the relative surplus population dwells in the sphere of pauperism. Apart from vagabonds, criminals, prostitutes, in short the actual lumpenproletariat, this social stratum consists of three categories. First, those able to work. One need only glance superficially at the statistics of English pauperism to find that the quantity of paupers increases with every crisis of trade, and diminishes with every revival. Second, orphans and pauper children. These are candidates for the industrial reserve army, and in times of great prosperity, such as the year 1860, for instance, they are enrolled in the army of active workers both speedily and in large numbers. Third, the demoralized, the ragged, and those unable to work, chiefly people who succumb to their incapacity for adaptation, an incapacity which results from the division of labour; people who have lived beyond the worker’s average life-span; and the victims of industry, whose number increases with the growth of dangerous machinery, of mines, chemical works, etc., the mutilated, the sickly, the widows, etc. Pauperism is the hospital of the active labour-army and the dead weight of the industrial reserve army. Its production is included in that of the relative surplus population, its necessity is implied by their necessity; along with the surplus population, pauperism forms a condition of capitalist production, and of the capitalist development of wealth. It forms part of the *faux frais* of capitalist production: but capital usually knows how to transfer these from its own shoulders to those of the working class and the petty bourgeoisie.” *Capital*, Vol. 1, p. 797

While the boom-bust cycle has transformed under capitalist-imperialism (as we saw recently in 2008 when numerous financial entities were designated “too big to fail”), child-labor is officially outlawed and therefore less common in imperialist countries, and the U.S. prison system serves to criminalize and employ a large part of the lowest section of the surplus population in slave-like conditions, Marx’s analysis still is basically correct and accurately describes our present situation. His distinction between the lumpen and the pauperized section of the working-class is particularly important for us to grasp because, given the high organic composition of capital in this country, a very large section of the working class belongs to the reserve army of labor.

⁷<https://www.bostonfed.org/publications/one-time-pubs/color-of-wealth.aspx>

and abuse by the police, up to and including outright killings on a regular basis. While brutal executions like that of Eric Garner tend to garner the most media attention, they are but one of the more extreme manifestations of the system of policing and mass incarceration the U.S. ruling class employs to control and oppress the working class, particularly those of oppressed nationalities. This is part of the capitalist class' overall strategy for "dealing with" surplus population and reflects the white supremacist nature of the U.S. state.

As a result of the increasingly desperate situation for the working class, the number of homeless has grown sharply and in several major cities (LA, San Francisco, Oakland, etc.) huge homeless encampments have sprung up, with homeless populations in these cities numbering in the tens of thousands. The situation among the rural poor is equally dire. A recent UN study⁸ found that the U.S. has over 40 million people living in poverty—this is likely a large underestimate—and according to the CIA's own statistics the U.S. has the highest Gini coefficient⁹ of any developed country in the world. Among the working class in the countryside, access to running water is scarce in some locations and a number of diseases typically associated with poor oppressed nations—such as hook worm—are on the rise.

These desperate situations spontaneously draw the working class into conflict with managers, capitalists, landlords, and the police. We have seen this manifest in different forms, most recently and significantly in the spontaneous mass rebellions in Ferguson and Baltimore. However, these movements have also demonstrated the limitations of such struggles. Without conscious revolutionary leadership, the bourgeoisie was able to defeat them through a combination of outright repression (police presence, deploying the national guard, arresting protesters, outright murder of the more radical elements, etc.) and ideological cooptation.

What's more, we are at a relative nadir of class struggle in this country. For example, in 2017 there were only seven strikes in which more than 1,000 workers participated, the lowest total ever. While there was a slight up-tick in 2018, many of the recent strike actions have come from graduate students and public school teachers, neither of which are part of the working class.¹⁰ In this

⁸<https://ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22533&LangID=E>

⁹The Gini coefficient is a bourgeois economic measure of inequality. A higher Gini coefficient indicates a greater level of inequality in a given country or region. While it does not measure inequality perfectly, it gives a general picture of the inequality in this country in comparison to other countries around the world.

¹⁰While teachers and grad students are often underpaid and sometimes face difficult working conditions, they are not actually members of the working class in terms of their relation to production. They do not experience capitalist exploitation in the sense of their labor producing profit for the capitalists. In contrast, industrial workers produce the physical commodities and commercial workers facilitate their sale, both of which are integral to producing and realizing surplus value. These different relations to production are also reflected in the actual conditions of labor for teachers and graduate students who primarily do mental labor and do not generally face the same degree of oppression and supervision that the working class is subjected to at

situation, it is essential that Maoists join the working class in their workplace struggles to help spark resistance and develop conscious struggle. This is an important part of the work to build deep links with the working class and promote proletarian class consciousness among them so as to develop these movements in a revolutionary direction and provide leadership to these struggles.

There is also a need to work among the progressive section of the petty-bourgeoisie. However, members of this class are often despondently nihilist and struggle to believe that a world free from oppression and exploitation is possible. Because of this, they often believe that it is in their best interest to support only minor reforms to the status-quo. Relatedly, they are easily deceived into reproducing bourgeois ideology with a “progressive” spin, such as bourgeois feminism and post-modernism. They are also inculcated with this ideology through media, social media (on which many of them spend the majority of their free time), and the bourgeois educational system in this country. Due to these and other factors many members of the progressive section of the petty-bourgeoisie see charity efforts, social media activism, “get out to vote drives,” and working at non-profits (which are functionally part of the bourgeois state)¹¹ as the only possible political activity. These activities also serve their class interests, allowing them to work office jobs and engage in political activity that does not jeopardize their class position.¹² As a class, the petty-bourgeoisie constantly fear proletarianization. In the current economic

work. These difference are reflected in the political content and ideology of the organizing efforts of graduate students and teachers.

What’s more, even those few strike actions which have occurred among the working class have been of a dominantly trade-unionist character. This stands in sharp contrast to the militant and revolutionary strikes of the 19th and 20th centuries. Songs such as Woody Guthrie’s *Union Burying Ground* captured the open antagonism between proletariat and bourgeoisie of past labor struggles:

“Tell me who’s that they’re letting down, down, Way over in that Union Burying Ground. Another union organizer, Another union organizer, Way over in that Union Burying Ground. [...] I’m going to sleep in a union coffin, Way over in that Union Burying ground. Every new grave brings a thousand members.”

The one significant exception to the more reformist trade-union strikes, has been the recent series of prison strikes, which have been more militant in character, and were met with brutal crackdowns by the ruling class. They also are generally not counted in official statistics on labor actions, but represent an important militant trend in the labor movement.

¹¹While non-profits are not officially part of the U.S. state they have proliferated in recent years in part to partially fill in the various gaps left by the roll-backs of social welfare programs. These non-profits receive conditional funding from the government and various capitalist institutions such as the Ford Foundation. They have to reapply for funding grants every six months or every year and demonstrate that they are pursuing policies in line—politically, ideologically, and economically—with the interests of the ruling class. Should they do something in contradiction to these interests they will either lose their funding or be forced to undergo a major organizational shake-up in order to keep the money flowing.

¹²Among the progressive section of the petty-bourgeoisie there is often a significant social obligation to be “doing something” about the injustices and oppression in U.S. society and the world. While this is in some senses a positive thing, “doing something” often amounts to little more than Facebook “activism,” working at a non-profit, or campaigning for a Democratic Party candidate. Thus the dominance of bourgeois ideology funnels the progressive tendencies of the petty-bourgeoisie into political dead-ends which functionally preserve and reproduce bourgeois class rule.

situation, many of them are pushed into more proletarian class positions, but given their class background the attitudes they adopt in regard to their new class position are frequently reactionary.

For example, the job prospects for recent college graduates have significantly worsened since the start of the Great Recession. Simultaneously, student loan debt has more than quadrupled since 2004, increasing from \$345 billion to over \$1.6 trillion outstanding today. Over 44 million people have student loan debt, over 70% of college students graduate with student loan debt, and the average graduate in 2017 had \$39,400 in debt. Given the weakened job prospects, it should come as no surprise that over 16% of borrowers are over 90 days delinquent on their loan payments and have effectively defaulted.¹³ This is just one example of the economic pressure that the petty-bourgeoisie faces at the present moment. Other sections, such as small business owners and small proprietors, face similar difficulties.

Weakened job prospects have pushed many among the petty-bourgeoisie to take working class jobs. In some senses this provides an objective basis for the progressive section of the petty-bourgeoisie to join in struggle with the proletariat. However, even the more progressive members of the petty-bourgeoisie often harbor deep anti-people ideas and take on, to one degree or another, the world outlook of the small proprietor. As such, even while working as a wage laborer, many are inclined to see this as a temporary stop on the way to living one form or another of “the American Dream.” As such, they struggle to identify with their coworkers from a working-class background and often cozy up to management. Many even go on to become low-level managers themselves and thereby play a direct role in oppressing the working class instead of joining with them in solidarity. Therefore, while there is a basis to work among the progressive section of the petty-bourgeoisie—as this class is ultimately a friend of the revolution—there are significant obstacles to doing so, and without ideological transformation to adopt a proletarian class-stand, the petty bourgeoisie will continue to cling to many non-proletarian ideas which express themselves strongly in certain circumstances.

The ruling class in this country is facing a developing crisis in its strategic decline internationally as Chinese imperialism (and to a lesser extent Russian imperialism) challenges the U.S. monopoly capitalist class’ dominance in various markets, regions, and key territories. They are also facing increasing degrees of mass resistance in many neocolonies, from the Philippines to India and even Afghanistan where—although revolutionary forces remain small—mass resistance has been so significant that the U.S. has been unable to secure control of the country despite 18 years of warfare and occupation. What’s more contradictions between the U.S. and various allies are sharpening, as can be seen in

¹³Due to a series of oppressive laws passed between 1976 and 1998, student loans cannot be cleared via bankruptcy except in extremely rare circumstances. This makes them the only type of debt which cannot be discharged via bankruptcy besides that incurred from criminal fraud and child support.

growing conflict within NATO. These international developments have forced the U.S. monopoly capitalist class to seek out new avenues for profit, including developing new means to further exploit workers internal to the U.S. to compensate for losing access to key markets abroad.

What's more the contradictions internal to the U.S. ruling class are sharpening. This was particularly evident in the most recent presidential election where both the Republican and Democratic parties had "outsider" candidates as front-runners at certain points.¹⁴ Even Trump's victory was a surprise as Hillary Clinton clearly was the favored candidate among the bourgeoisie. Since Trump's election, the Democrats' strategy of accusing Trump of being "compromised" by Russia, a strategic rival of the U.S., and launching an investigation into his links with the country are also indicative of the sharpening contradictions internal to the ruling class.¹⁵

In the relatively near future we are likely to face a significant economic downturn in this country and globally. A number of warning signs point to the increasingly likelihood of resurgence of a full-blown economic depression in the near-term. While this is unlikely to lead to a revolutionary crisis in the U.S., it will, much like the financial crisis in 2008, strain the unity of bourgeois rule and provide key openings for revolutionaries to develop mass resistance.

In this situation a handful of revolutionaries around the country have taken up the task of organizing for socialist revolution. At present our forces are weak both numerically and organizationally. Some local organizations have developed, but we have to advance our coordination on the national scale. What's more, our links with the masses remain modest, and while we have sparked resistance on numerous fronts we have yet to succeed in developing and consolidating larger mass organizations among the working class. These circumstances are difficult, but can be overcome.

Despite these weaknesses, we also have some strengths. We have a number of extremely dedicated professional revolutionaries in our ranks. They work tire-

¹⁴It is likely that, had the Democratic National Committee not pulled a series of underhanded maneuvers to ensure that Hillary secured the nomination, the reformist candidate Bernie Sanders would have won the Democratic nomination.

¹⁵While criticizing an incumbent administration has been part of the political strategy of both parties since their founding, arguing that Trump is consciously acting in the interests of a strategic rival is of a qualitatively different nature. The U.S. ruling class, as a whole, is increasingly being challenged by their Russian and Chinese counterparts. However, a subsection of the U.S. ruling class has significant economic ties with these strategic rivals and therefore seeks to continue and even expand business with them. For example, Exxon Mobil had a number of joint-ventures with Russian oil companies aimed at developing deep-sea drilling techniques for the Arctic Ocean where sea-ice prevents the use of existing deep-water drilling technology. This issue came to a head in the U.S. government when Trump's former Secretary of State and former Exxon Mobil CEO Rex Tillerson unsuccessfully pushed for Congress to grant Exxon an exemption to U.S. sanctions against Russia to clear the way for these deals. Similar contradictions are also sharpening with members the ruling class of the some key U.S. allies, such as France and Germany, who have extensive trade with Russia or with Iran.

lessly each and every day to develop the revolutionary movement in this country. In our relatively brief period of existence we have also worked hard to sharpen our theoretical understanding and knowledge of revolutionary history. We have developed a proletarian culture of comradely criticism and self-criticism which has allowed us to correct mistakes, rectify various shortcomings, and struggle against alien-class tendencies within our ranks. We have also worked hard to develop collective forms of leadership based on the principle of democratic centralism. Despite the overall weakness of our movement these strengths are a solid foundation on which it can grow. They provide some of the key means by which we can develop our organization into the proletarian vanguard and provide leadership to the revolutionary movement in this country.

2. Some Lessons from Recent Political Struggles in the U.S. and the History of the Bolshevik Party

Given the low-level of class struggle at present in this country, the weakness of our movement is not at all surprising. In fact, it is expected. Through studying the history of revolutionary movements we can better understand our present situation and what to expect in the future. The dominance of bourgeois ideology in capitalist society produces some unique challenges that we must grapple with and handle correctly.

First and foremost we must be clear that the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie dominates the proletariat politically, economically, and ideologically. One result of this domination is that, absent a revolutionary organization, the spontaneous rebellion of the masses is channeled into various dead-ends, reformist measures, or even beaten down with outright repression. The bourgeoisie has a highly developed system of electoral efforts, advertising, police measures, non-profit activists, and media outlets which all work tirelessly to dominate mass struggles and promote bourgeois ideology within these very movements.

As Lenin put it:

The *spontaneous* development of the working-class movement leads to its subordination to bourgeois ideology...for the spontaneous working-class movement is trade-unionism...and trade unionism means the ideological enslavement of the workers by the bourgeoisie. Hence, our task, the task of Social-Democracy [Marxism], is *to combat spontaneity, to divert* the working-class movement from this spontaneous, trade-unionist striving to come under the wing of the bourgeoisie, and to bring it under the wing of revolutionary Social Democracy [Marxism].¹⁶

¹⁶Lenin, "What is to Be Done?", *Lenin Collected Works*, Vol. 5, p. 384-385. While these remarks refer specifically to trade unionism as one particular form of bourgeois ideology, they are generally applicable to a whole series of ideological dead-ends by which the bourgeoisie dominate mass resistance.

While the spontaneous upsurges in the mass movement are very positive developments, by themselves they are unable to overcome the dominance of bourgeois ideology or overthrow the bourgeois state. What's more, despite the myth of American Democracy, the bourgeoisie is more than willing to employ outright repression and even assassinations to curtail the growth of mass movements and eliminate more radical leaders.¹⁷ The defeat of the uprisings in Ferguson and Baltimore shows this stark reality, as does the disintegration of the Occupy movement, and the transformation of the Black Lives Matter movement into reformist appendage of the Democratic Party.¹⁸

The successes *and* failures of these movements have important lessons for revolutionaries in this country. Principal among them is that without an organization of professional revolutionaries—those who make it their life, their daily occupation, to bring about a revolutionary overthrow of the U.S. state—it will be impossible to consolidate the victories of a struggle, avoid destruction at the hands of the police and FBI, and prevent the political degeneration of movements into bourgeois reformism.

Political uprisings and mass movements provide the basis for the development of mass organizations and even for influxes of members of the masses into a cadre organization or revolutionary Party. However, while many members of the masses will doubtless join the Party (or pre-party organizations prior the existence of an anti-revisionist Communist Party in this country) the reality is that under capitalism the majority of the masses will not be able to raise themselves to the theoretical, practical, and organizational level necessary to be a cadre in a revolutionary Party. As Lenin put it, “It would be...tail-ism to think that the entire class, or almost the entire class, can ever rise, under capitalism, to the level of consciousness and activity of its vanguard, of its Social-Democratic [Communist] Party.”¹⁹ This does not mean that revolutionaries should not work with these members of the masses, on the contrary, it is absolutely necessary to work with a wide section of the masses, even if many will not develop into cadre.

An essential aspect of revolutionary work is the development of a wide variety of mass organizations in which the working class and friends of the revolution

¹⁷For example, the U.S. state murdered Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., and many members of the Black Panther Party. More recently, Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests revealed a coordinated plan between the FBI and local police departments to assassinate key leaders in the Occupy movement had it continued to grow: <https://www.truthdig.com/articles/redacted-fbi-documents-show-plot-to-kill-occupy-leaders-if-deemed-necessary/>

¹⁸This transformation is particularly apparent in the case of DeRay McKesson, a prominent BLM activist in Baltimore who parlayed his “radical credentials” into a Mayoral campaign. Likewise, in Boston, the BLM chapter works closely with various Democratic Party politicians and even invited Boston’s Mayor Marty Walsh to speak at one of their rallies in 2017. See also Mass Action for Black Liberation’s criticisms of the Black Lives Matter movement in their article *Why Black Lives Matter: Cincinnati is Changing Its Name*, <http://blacklivescincy.com/home/2018/03/28/why-black-lives-matter-cincinnati-is-changing-its-name/>.

¹⁹Lenin, “One Step Forward, Two Steps Back,” *Lenin Collected Works (LCW)*, Vol. 7, p. 258.

can discuss and debate ideas, gain experience in the class struggle on different levels, and develop politically, theoretically, and ideologically. These organizations can further mass initiative, and serve as links between the Party and the broad masses. They also give the Party's work its mass character, and provide a way for members of the masses who are awakening to politics for the first time to get involved in the struggle. They can be revolutionary trade unions, tenant's associations, anti-war groups, organizations fighting against police brutality, women's organizations, and more.

During periods of relative stability under the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie these organizations may be relatively small and have only a few thousand members. However, during revolutionary crises millions and tens of millions of people awaken to politics for the first time. If a Party has deep links with the masses, is well organized, has developed a correct political line, and has demonstrated the correctness of this line to the masses, then a revolutionary crisis can be transformed into a revolution. Lenin spoke on this topic during the Third Congress of the Comintern in 1921:

I have been speaking too long as it is; hence I wish to say only a few words about the concept of 'masses'. It is one that changes in accordance with the changes in the nature of the struggle. At the beginning of the struggle it took only a few thousand genuinely revolutionary workers to warrant talk of the masses. If the party succeeds in drawing into the struggle not only its own members, if it also succeeds in arousing non-party people, it is well on the way to winning the masses. During our revolutions there were instances when several thousand workers represented the masses. In the history of our movement, and of our struggle against the Mensheviks, you will find many examples where several thousand workers in a town were enough to give a clearly mass character to the movement. You have a mass when several thousand non-party workers, who usually live a philistine life and drag out a miserable existence, and who have never heard anything about politics, begin to act in a revolutionary way...**When the revolution has been sufficiently prepared, the concept 'masses' becomes different: several thousand workers no longer constitute the masses. This word begins to denote something else. The concept of 'masses' undergoes a change so that it implies the majority, and not simply a majority of the workers alone, but the majority of all the exploited.** [emphasis ours] Any other kind of interpretation is impermissible for a revolutionary, and any other sense of the word becomes incomprehensible. It is possible that even a small party, the British or American party, for example, after it has thoroughly studied the course of political development and become acquainted with the life and customs of the non-party masses, will at a favorable moment evoke a revolutionary movement...You will have a mass movement if such a party comes forward with its slo-

gans at such a moment and succeeds in getting millions of workers to follow it. I would not altogether deny that a revolution can be started by a very small party and brought to victorious conclusion. But one must have a knowledge of the methods by which the masses can be won over. For this thoroughgoing preparation of revolution is essential...Without thoroughgoing preparations you will not achieve victory in any country. Quite a small party is sufficient to lead the masses. At certain times there is no necessity for big organizations.²⁰

This analysis is validated by the history of the Bolshevik party itself. In order to better understand the future trajectory of our movement, the different types of challenges that we are likely to face, and the dynamics of a revolutionary situation, it is helpful to analyze the events of 1917 in some detail. While our movement will involve countless different particularities, there are many general lessons from the Bolsheviks' work in 1917 which have direct relevance to our present struggle and future efforts.

In a country of around 120 million people, the Bolsheviks had around 12,000 members as of January 1, 1917. Even though they worked with a large number of the masses, and had been in existence in one form or another since 1903²¹ the Party was still relatively small. Prior to the revolutionary upsurges in late 1916 and early 1917, this relatively small number of cadre had been sufficient to maintain deep links with sections of the masses engaged in revolutionary political activity. However, the revolutionary situation that developed in Russia drastically transformed the nature of mass rebellion, both quantitatively and qualitatively. This required the Bolsheviks to adapt to the new situation, including by promoting mass influxes into the party. During the period of January to October 1917 the party grew twenty-five-fold. This growth was not just a quantitative development, but also represented the qualitative transformation of the relations between the Bolshevik Party and the broad Russian masses. This is evident from the fact that by the time of the October Revolution the Bolsheviks had the support of the masses in leading a revolution against the Provisional Government and establishing the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.

The February Revolution in Russia began in mid-February with strikes and demonstrations by workers and soldiers in Petrograd. These activities were partially spontaneous and partially organized by the Bolsheviks and others. The masses had grown increasingly outraged by the country's participation in the war, the desperate conditions which existed in part as a result of the war effort—for example sending food to the front while near famine conditions existed throughout the country—and the general misery that they faced daily. Years of tireless organizing on the part of the Bolshevik Party had created the

²⁰Lenin, "Speech in Defense of the Tactics of the Communist International," July 1, 1921. *LCW*, Volume 32, p. 476.

²¹1903 was the year of the Second Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party. Although the First Congress had been held in 1898, it did not lead to practical unity in the Party, and the majority of attendees were arrested immediately after the Congress.

basis to clarify to the advanced section of the masses that the world war was an inter-imperialist conflict for plunder that would not benefit the people of Russia.

By the twenty-seventh of the month, the Winter Palace was taken and the Tsar abdicated. In the immediate wake of this revolution, mass support was divided between the Bolsheviks, Mensheviks,²² and Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs)²³ who had all played a role in the February Revolution. The Russian bourgeoisie, who had barely been involved in the revolution and were largely subordinate to and dependent on Tsarism,²⁴ also maneuvered to put themselves in charge of the government. They were supported by the Mensheviks and SRs in forming the Provisional Government which was led by many prominent members of the bourgeoisie.²⁵ So, while the abdication of the Tsar was a significant step forward and a real revolutionary transformation of Russian society, the February Revolution did not overthrow the bourgeoisie or establish a proletarian dictatorship.²⁶

²²The Mensheviks were an opportunist party who initially split with the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) after the Second Party Congress in 1903. In Russian Bolshevik and Menshevik mean majority and minority respectively. The Mensheviks advocated tailing the bourgeoisie in the democratic revolution to overthrow the Tsar and pushed for a loose criterion defining party membership, where anyone who declared support for the Party would be considered a member. Needless to say in an absolutist state like Tsarist Russia this would have been tantamount to opening the doors of the party to the Tsar's secret police. After the February Revolution in 1917, the Mensheviks increasingly took on a counter-revolutionary role.

²³The Socialist Revolutionary Party traced its origins to the earlier Narodnik movement that had advocated excitative terror and a conspiratorial strategy for revolution. They took the class outlook of the rural petty-bourgeoisie and rich peasants, and had significant links among the upper-stratum of the peasantry and with the rural intelligentsia. After the February Revolution the SRs grew increasingly divided into Left and Right factions. The former grew closer to the Bolsheviks while the latter advocated continued participation in the World War, and support for the Provisional Government. They eventually split along these lines.

²⁴Charles Bettelheim explains the dependence of the Russian bourgeoisie on Tsarism thus: "The lack of any real political initiative on the part of the bourgeoisie in relation to tsardom, which granted it hardly any political rights, was also due to its economic dependence on tsardom. The relatively rapid process of industrialization which developed in the last years of the nineteenth century and the years preceding the First World War was, in fact, based only partly on accumulation of industrial profits and expansion of the home market. It depended partly on foreign investment, but also on government money—loans from the state bank, orders from the public services, etc. To a large extent Russia's industrial expansion was still based on a "primitive accumulation" (an increasing expropriation of the peasantry) of which the tsardom was the political and ideological instrument. The lack of real political initiative by the bourgeoisie explains the peculiarities of the February Revolution of 1917, which began by throwing up soviets, whereas the bourgeois Provisional Government was not formed till later." Charles Bettelheim, *Class Struggles in the USSR: First Period 1917-1923*, p. 71-72.

²⁵This utter treachery showed the class character of the SRs and Mensheviks. Instead of seizing upon the revolutionary initiative of the masses, and establishing the dictatorship of the proletariat, they worked to install the bourgeoisie in power at a time when the working class was beginning to establish its own state. This was a particularly stark betrayal of the masses because the bourgeoisie had offered basically no support to the February Revolution.

²⁶Given the strength of the revolutionary movement, it did, however, establish a form of proletarian political power in the soviets which continued to exist alongside the bourgeois Provisional Government. For more on this unique and unstable situation see Lenin, "The Dual Power", April 19, 1917, *LCW*, Volume 24, p. 38-41.

Despite the success of the February Revolution, and the treachery of the Mensheviks and SRs in supporting the Provisional Government, in many places the Bolsheviks were only supported by a minority of the politically active masses—especially in the countryside among the peasantry, but also in many urban centers. For example, on March 6, 1917 the Bolsheviks had only forty members in the Petrograd Soviet out of the two to three hundred delegates—the number of total delegates varied frequently during this period. Even in the First All-Russia Congress of the Soviets—which took place in June 1917—the Bolsheviks had only 105 delegates out of 1,090.²⁷

Despite these challenges, the Bolsheviks worked tirelessly to expose the treachery of the Mensheviks and SRs—in particular the fact that these parties, in conjunction with the Provisional Government, had not withdrawn Russia from the war but were instead continuing the war effort. They organized the broad masses who were awakening to revolutionary politics for the first time, and conducted agitation and propaganda to clarify the need for another revolution to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat. Because of this work, at the time of the Second All-Russia Congress of the Soviets in October, the Bolsheviks had a majority in the Congress.²⁸ This transformation was paralleled by mass influxes into the Bolshevik Party itself, which saw its membership rise to ~300,000 by the time of the October Revolution. In these circumstances the Bolsheviks were well aware that the revolutionary enthusiasm of the masses more than compensated for their lack of theoretical and practical training, a lesson they had learned in 1905.²⁹ These deep links with the masses, the large expansion of

²⁷Charles Bettelheim, *Class Struggles in the USSR: First Period 1917-1923*, p. 75. Bettelheim notes that, despite being in the minority at the Congress, the Bolsheviks “already dominated the workers’ section of the congress, in which a resolution expressing their views was passed by 173 votes to 144.”

²⁸During this period, the number of soviets across the country was rapidly increasing. This was due to the complex dialectical relationship between the spontaneous activity of the masses and the conscious work of the Bolshevik Party.

²⁹In the midst of the 1905 Russian Revolution, in which the masses were daily being educated in political struggle by the revolutionary upheavals, Lenin stated,

“We must considerably increase the membership of all Party and Party-connected organisations in order to be able to keep up to some extent with the stream of popular revolutionary energy which has been a hundred fold strengthened. This, it goes without saying, does not mean that consistent training and systematic instruction in the Marxist truths are to be left in the shade. We must, however, remember that at the present time far greater significance in the matter of training and education attaches to the military operations, which teach the untrained precisely and entirely in our sense. We must remember that our “doctrinaire” faithfulness to Marxism is now being reinforced by the march of revolutionary events, which is everywhere furnishing object lessons to the masses and that all these lessons confirm precisely our dogma. Hence, we do not speak about abandoning the dogma, or relaxing our distrustful and suspicious attitude towards the woolly intellectuals and the arid-minded revolutionaries. Quite the contrary. We speak about new methods of teaching dogma, which it would be unpardonable for a Social-Democrat to forget. We speak of the importance for our day of using the object lessons of the great revolutionary events in order to convey—not to study circles, as in the past, but to the masses—our old, “dogmatic” lessons that, for example, it is necessary in practice to combine terror

membership in the party, and the masses confidence in the Party allowed the Bolsheviks to put into practice a correct political line and go forward with the October Revolution.³⁰

3. Our Present Tasks and Future Trajectory

Given the present situation there is an immediate need to strengthen our organizations and develop deeper links with the masses. These are two interrelated tasks which mutually determine each other, and one cannot be carried out in isolation from the other. The increasingly dire situation that the masses of this country face provides ample opportunities for organizing mass resistance and providing revolutionary leadership to a wide variety of struggles. However, these are not tasks which can be improvised. They require a disciplined organization of professional revolutionaries who have learned from experience how to lead the masses in struggle, who have studied revolutionary theory and understand the lessons of the ICM, and who above all, have developed a correct political line for advancing on the road to revolution and communism.

Lenin elaborates on these requirements in “*Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*”:

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

with the uprising of the masses, or that behind the liberalism of the educated Russian society one must be able to discern the class interests of our bourgeoisie.”

Lenin, “New Tasks and New Forces,” *LCW*, Vol. 8, p. 217-218.

³⁰It is important to note that the decision to go forward with the insurrection in October was the result of sharp struggle internal to the Party. This speaks to the importance of two line struggle in the Party itself, and the need for revolutionaries to go against the tide, even in their own organizations, as Lenin did in advocating insurrection at a time when the majority of the leadership of the Party was initially apprehensive about the prospects of success.

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.³¹

At present we are in the infancy of our work, or even in the embryonic state. A small number of disciplined revolutionaries have come together and begun to get organized. We have learned some key lessons from the history of the ICM, and have begun to develop deep links with the masses. However, this work has just begun, and we have a long way to go. We must continue to work to expand our links with the masses by joining them in existing struggles and drawing them into new ones through agitation and propaganda, organizing in large-scale industry and highly socialized work places, and going among the most oppressed and downtrodden sections of the working class.

Given the present low level of class struggle and the related dominance of bourgeois ideology there are not many active political struggles in this country at present.³² Where they do exist we must involve ourselves in them, struggle against the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois forces who attempt to position themselves as the leaders of these movements, and work to develop the struggles into conscious revolutionary movements. In these efforts it is of the utmost importance that we identify and unite with the most advanced and active elements among the masses—who will invariably only constitute a small section of the movement in question—win them over to a revolutionary line, and rely on them to raise the level of the intermediate elements among the masses—who compose the vast majority of those involved in a given movement.

In the cases and situations where there is not organized political resistance we must work hard to develop it. This entails going among the masses in a variety of manners, including through getting jobs in proletarian workplaces, especially in large-scale industry and other highly socialized workplaces with a large concentration of workers at single site of production. It also entails conducting agitation and propaganda among the working class on a wide range of issues. Given the number of unemployed and semi-employed members of the working class in this country, our work must also focus on developing organizations for the unemployed and deepening solidarity between members of the working class with jobs and those who are part of the surplus population.

Through these efforts we will gain valuable experience in leading and developing revolutionary struggles among the masses. In conjunction with our internal organizational work, this will help us prepare for the crises that inevitably will develop in this country and internationally. Until such a crisis does develop, we will not be able to draw the majority of the masses in this country into

³¹Lenin, “‘Left-Wing’ Communism: an Infantile Disorder,” *LCW*, Vol. 31, p. 24-25.

³²Political struggles in the sense used here are those mass struggles in which the goals, efforts, and aspirations of the masses extend beyond their immediate interests and take aim at the larger political issues in society.

revolutionary political struggle. However, the work that we are doing here and now lays the foundation for future struggle. As the above quotes from Lenin show, even a relatively small Party is capable of leading a revolution provided that it has sufficient experience in the class struggle, a correct political line, deep links to the masses, and is able to adapt to the rapidly shifting situations brought about by a revolutionary crisis in the country. We do not yet have a revolutionary Party in this country, but through principled work and tireless efforts we can create one.