

Study Notes on Lenin's
**NEW TASKS
AND
NEW FORCES**

**Written for a
Revolutionary
Situation and Its
Relevance to the 80's**

by Jack Yeager

Lenin's article *New Tasks and New Forces* was written in 1905 to deal with the correct way to view the Party's tasks during the 1905 uprising in Russia. We must remember that this article deals with tasks under a revolutionary situation, because it is very easy to apply the words of the article literally to our present situation. Right now we are in a *pre-revolutionary* situation, where the capitalist stabilization has ended and the masses are absorbing the punishing toll of U.S. imperialism. We live in a period where there are no mass upsurges yet, where the masses are disoriented, absorbing the brunt of punishment of the economic crisis and where groups of people in different localities around the country are beginning to organize in a broad sense. But the potential is becoming more and more immediate.

Moreover, we must qualify the context of this article because in 1975-76 — in a rash of city crises starting in New York City — there was a spontaneous response, including demonstrations against banks, etc. In that situation, we tended to get carried away and generalized it to other strata. But that's not correct. Clearly, the crisis has spread and deepened ever since the U.S. defeat in Indochina, is still deepening and the masses are still getting punished for it. But the resistance has not been organized mainly because of the spontaneous consciousness and organization. This organization to some extent has disintegrated and is getting ready to gel together again on a higher level — minus the stranglehold of labor aristocrats. We are in a situation of tremendous opportunity for the proletarian forces, for the Party to assume leadership. But at this point, the upsurge has not arrived.

Now let's get into the universal aspects of the lessons of *New Tasks and New Forces*. Lenin started with: **"The development of a mass working-class movement in Russia in connection with the development of Social-Democracy is marked by three notable transitions. The first was the transition from narrow propagandist circles to wide economic agitation among the masses; the second was the transition to political agitation on a large scale and to open street demonstrations; the third was the transition to actual civil war, to direct revolutionary struggle, to the armed political uprising. Each of these transitions was prepared, on the one hand, by socialist thought working mainly in one direction, and on the other, by the profound changes that had taken place in the conditions of life and in the whole mentality of the working class, as well as by the fact that increasingly wider strata of the working class were roused to more conscious and active struggle. Sometimes these changes took place imperceptibly,**

the proletariat rallying its forces behind the scenes in an unsensational way, so that the intellectuals often doubted the lasting quality and the vital power of the mass movement. There would then be a turning point, and the whole revolutionary movement would, suddenly, as it were, rise to a new and higher stage. The proletariat and its vanguard, Social-Democracy, would be confronted with new practical tasks, to deal with which, new forces would spring up, seemingly out of the ground, forces whose existence no one had suspected shortly before the turning point."

The first thing we could learn from is Lenin's classification of the three notable transitions. One was the transition from narrow propaganda circles to wide economic agitation.

He said those transitions were brought about by two factors. One is **"the profound changes that had taken place in the conditions of life and in the whole mentality of the working class, as well as by the fact that increasingly wider strata of the working class were roused to more conscious and active struggle."** The other is the change in the subjective factor, namely: **"the proletariat rallying its forces behind the scenes in an unsensational way."** And when the subjective factor acts upon the objective changes affecting millions and millions of people, it amplifies. In other words, when the Party's work amplifies the spontaneous subjective factor—such as the spontaneous consciousness of the masses and the spontaneous organization, like the rudimentary organizations, the trade unions — at the right time, like in this coming period, there will be upsurges. Together, when the subjective factor acts upon the spontaneous objective factor, a big change occurs in the period, a big leap forward.

So a combination of both objective and subjective factors gave rise to a leap or a transition. Each time there is a leap, the tasks of communists must change, because the conditions of the masses — and especially their openness to communist propaganda and leadership — will be qualitatively different. And each time there is a transition, you have to emphasize different tasks. But these transitions will not be smooth-going. They will be painful and abound with contradictions, going against inertia of every kind.

Lenin said that every time we go through such a transition, there are bound to be vacillations. And these vacillations are particularly heavy among intellectuals, who intellectually conceive tasks but practically do not have the stand to implement them due to various class interests, lack of experience or whatever reasons. Moreover, they try to justify their vacillations. That's why during each transition, there always tend to be different lines coming out and Lenin said: **"Social-Democracy in Russia is once again passing through such a period of vacillation [he's referring to the period of 1905 from a pre-revolutionary situation to a revolutionary situation]."**



Afro-Americans at Miami Hospital denounce police terror. The May 19th armed rebellion of the Afro-American masses – speaking for the whole U.S. people – is just a preview of the revolutionary class and national struggle to come in the 80's.

There was a time when political agitation had to break its way through opportunist theories, when it was feared that we would not be equal to the new tasks, when excessive repetition of the adjective 'class', or a tail-ender's interpretation of the Party's attitude to the class, was used to justify the fact that the Social-Democrats lagged behind the demands of the proletariat. The course of the movement has swept aside all these short-sighted fears and backward views. The new upsurge now is attended once more, although in a somewhat different form, by a struggle against obsolete circles and tendencies. The *Rabocheye Dyeloists* have come to life again in the new *Iskristis*. To adapt our tactics and our organization to the new tasks, we have to overcome the resistance of opportunist theories of 'a higher type of demonstration', or of the 'organization-as-process' . . . Once again, excessive repetition of the word 'class' and belittlement of the Party's tasks in regard to the class are used to justify the fact that Social-Democracy is lagging behind the urgent needs of the proletariat."

So he's saying that each time a transition occurs – with the new tasks required – the opportunists will come out with another qualification, a new justification. Once again, as the 1905 upsurge proved, after the backward views of the Economists were defeated – the view saying the workers were not political, that they would not take up the political tasks of fight

tsarism – the Economists on the one hand would quietly accept the workers' political role, but on the other hand would again come out with a whole new spectrum of opportunist views. They would again argue against a set of new tasks correctly set by the communists, saying for instance, instead of calling for insurrection, the proletariat is not ready, etc.

For that reason, Lenin said the main thing is to deal with our own positive program and not constantly react or endlessly debate with opportunists. For "there is not the slightest doubt that the movement, in its course, will once again sweep aside these survivals of obsolete lifeless views." He cautioned, "Such sweeping aside, however, should not be reduced to mere rejection of the old errors, but, what is *incomparably more important*, [our emphasis] it should take the form of constructive revolutionary work towards fulfilling the new tasks, towards attracting into our Party and utilizing the new forces that are now coming into the revolutionary field in such vast masses. It is these questions of constructive revolutionary work that should be the main subject in the deliberation of the forthcoming Third Congress." So he said that instead of getting trapped with obsolete and endless opportunist views, "The practical question confronting us now is, first, *how to utilize, direct, unite, and organize these new forces; how to focus Social-Democratic work on the new, higher tasks of the day* [our emphasis] without for a

moment forgetting the old, ordinary run of tasks that confront us, and will continue to confront us." He's saying that without forgetting the principles and correct lines argued for in the past, we must focus on the higher tasks.

One thing Lenin said is under a situation of broad participation of the masses and a more focused political situation, communists should do more direct communist work, and leave other work to other people who are just becoming involved and taking it up as their own, such as more focused trade union struggles and other spontaneous struggles. We should pay more attention to make sure that these spontaneous struggles are aimed in a revolutionary direction. In other words, **"In the beginning we had to teach the workers the ABCs, both in the literal and figurative senses. Now the standard of political literacy has risen so gigantically that we can and should concentrate all our efforts on the more direct Social-Democratic objectives aimed at giving an organized direction to the revolutionary stream."**

Well, there is a change in tasks right there. Why is that? Why is it that we have to do more direct Party work? Does that mean we haven't been doing Party work before when we stressed getting involved in immediate economic struggles? No, that's not the case. The Russian Social-Democrats went through some of the same phases. For example, Lenin said, **"In the initial stages of the movement a Social-Democrat had to carry on a great deal of what almost amounted to cultural work, or to concentrate almost exclusively on economic agitation."** Now why was that? Why was it the communists **"concentrated almost exclusively on economic agitation"**? That again is related to the historical development of communist forces. Like Lenin said earlier, the first transition was from **"narrow propaganda circles (among intellectuals and few advanced workers) to wide economic agitation among the masses"** as the conditions changed. That's because Marxism was first developed among intellectuals. They must unite among themselves around different directions, definition of tasks and the line they're going to follow. After that unity is accomplished, they must go to the workers. That's when the transition from narrow propaganda circles to wide economic agitation occurred. The task of seriously dealing with fusion starts. When you first go into the working class, you have to fuse with the masses, to lead the workers as communists. You have to inevitably overemphasize the need to sink roots among the class and lead them on their day-to-day economic agitation, i.e., economic struggle. And that's what led to a situation where, as Lenin put it, **"in the initial stages of the movement a Social-Democrat had to carry on a great deal of what almost amounted to cultural work,"** that is, work to create a certain background to get into a whole new setting, or to concentrate almost exclusively on

economic agitation. He said, **"Now these functions, one after another, are passing into the hands of new forces (new forces in a situation where there is great economic struggle in Russia), of wider sections that are being enlisted in the movement. The revolutionary organizations have concentrated more and more on carrying out the function of real political leadership, the function of drawing Social-Democratic conclusions from the workers' protest and the popular discontent."** So the conclusion we can draw is that under certain periods of transition, we have some of the experience so we have to do more direct Party work. And that emphasis on more direct Party work does not mean we did not do Party work before. That would be absurd, of course. But it's created by a situation where objectively overall it is a whole new phase of the mass movement due to the combination of objective and subjective factors and leads to a change of tasks. The right line will be to ask the Party to maintain the emphasis on economic agitation and not mainly draw communist conclusions and give direction to the struggle. The "left" deviation surpasses the stage at the time, for example, to jump to the third stage that Lenin talked about, into an actual civil war, to popular uprising, to mass insurrection. So you skip a period of educating the masses politically, drawing socialist conclusions, preparing for the dictatorship of the proletariat. Thus the line struggle will be over either to lag or to leap "too far ahead" — both forms of subjectivism. One will be putchism, voluntarism, leaping beyond the readiness of the masses and the Party. Our tasks, our subjective factor will leap, and will not correspond to the objective situation. The other will lag behind the consciousness of the masses and the needs of the class as a whole at that point. □