

# **Left Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder**

A Study Guide of the Young Communist League, USA

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Dear Club Member,

Lenin's *Left Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder* gives us an introduction to understanding how Marxist strategy and tactics are formulated and tested. For Lenin it was not enough to just want and work towards socialism, but how you actually planned to get there mattered as well.

*Left Wing Communism* is the first work that actually mentions strategy and tactics and what they mean for the Communist movement. Before this, Marx, Engels and other revolutionaries had not set out to discuss the formulation of strategy and tactics in both the movements for immediate reforms that were taking place and the long-term struggle for socialism. It was during Lenin's time, a period that saw communist and revolutionary parties and organizations coming to life in every country, that there was a need for a larger discussion on strategy and tactics.

From Lenin's standpoint, there were two different troubling trends when it came to the formulation of strategy and tactics. There was an opportunist trend that wanted to reform not abolish capitalism that was embodied in many of the Socialist and Labor Parties of Lenin's time. The other trend was "ultra-leftism" which advocated against compromises with the capitalist class, against working within reactionary trade unions and generally boycotted elections. Having dealt with the opportunist trend for many years, Lenin set out to tackle the problem of "ultra-leftism".

In *Left Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, Lenin wanted to make a distinction between the political "infantilism" of new organizations and those that were hardened ultra-leftists. New revolutionary groups had formed after the Russian Revolution of 1917, with many of them coming from the left-wing of other parties. Lenin saw that these groups were making tactical and strategic errors because of their general lack of experience. Lenin wanted to help these new groups by giving them criticism and advice so that they could avoid repeating past mistakes. Lenin, on the other hand, had no patience for hardened ultra-leftists that were disruptive and acted as obstructionists in the movement towards socialism.

We have to recognize and put into context the language that Lenin uses in the text. During Lenin's time period, there was still armed struggle being waged in different countries and the Soviet Union was just coming out of a civil war. The language and phrases that Lenin uses such as "iron discipline" of the Party and the "ruthless" struggle against the capitalist class reflects the climate of intense and deadly struggle that was taking place. Today, we would not use this type of language when discussing the work of the Party and the types of struggles that we are involved in.

In the following years after the publication of this text, there was much discussion in the world communist movement about strategy and tactics. The relationship between a given strategy and tactics that were used was explored more in-depth. Lenin did not actually explain how or even if

strategy and tactics were related or what they are. Today we understand that to develop a strategic goal, you have to look at the stage of social development and the class and social forces that exist. From there, you have to determine what would be the first qualitative change that you would need to make to move forward. With this in mind, then you need to think of what tactics will bring together the necessary social forces to make this change happen.

While you can have multiple tactics, you can only have one strategy. The strategy stays the same over a long period time, while your tactics must be flexible and change to meet new developments and keep pace with the direction of events on the ground. Making all of these connections is more of an art than a science and the world communist movement continues to debate, discuss and develop the ideas started within Lenin's work.

The study guide contains questions based on different sections of the book; an index and a facilitator's guide that will help you lead the discussion. Ideally your club or discussion group would set aside a hour or two to give time for a full discussion on each of the sections. You can order copies of the book from International Publishers for \$4.00. You can find their online catalog at [www.intpubnyc.com](http://www.intpubnyc.com) or call 212-366-9816.

At the end of the study guide you will find an evaluation sheet that you can fill out after you complete the study guide. Your comments, feedback and suggestions are very important and will help us to ensure that the study guide is a useful tool. You can mail your feedback and suggestions to YCLUSA 235 W. 23rd Street NY, NY 10011 or email them to [atenney@yclusa.org](mailto:atenney@yclusa.org)

Have fun reading,

Educational and Literature Committee of the Young Communist League, USA



# Reader's Guide

## Section I: *The Dangers of Opportunism and Ultra-Leftism*

1. Can you note tendencies today to universalize or romanticize the strategy and tactics of different progressive and revolutionary movements around the world? If so, what dangers would this pose for the working class movement in the United States?
2. What are the three conditions that Lenin outlines for a revolutionary party of the working class to meet? What is the relationship between these three principles and the development of strategy and tactics?
3. How might we define ultra-leftism? How might we define opportunism? What are some of the current manifestations of these political trends?
4. Can we have compromises and retreats and still move the struggle forward on whatever issue we are working on? If so, why would a revolutionary movement need to make a compromise or retreat? Could you think of any examples from today?
5. Do we see modern manifestations of Lenin's argument around the supposed difference between the leaders of movements and the masses?
6. Could we achieve socialism without a political party of the working class?
7. How would the ultra-right and big business benefit from a split between the leaders and masses of progressive and revolutionary movements?

## **Section II: *Marxist Strategy and Tactics: Moving the Struggle Forward***

1. Why is it important for a party of the working class to be active and have members of trade unions , even reactionary ones? What can Communists who are within a reactionary trade union do to change its direction in a unifying way?
2. Can a Communist Party only work with the most "advanced" and "revolutionary" sections of the working class? Why do we need to struggle alongside people who do not have "Left" or progressive stances on different issues?
3. Can we make fundamental, long-term social change in the United States without participating in electoral politics?
4. What are some of the arguments that Lenin makes for the need for Communists and revolutionaries to participate in electoral struggle, even if they personally feel that it is "obsolete"?

### **Section III. *Revolutionary Enthusiasm: Avoiding the Mistakes of the Past***

1. Why is it important for people to have their own practical experience in political struggle? How does participating in different areas of struggle such as elections and in trade unions help to elevate and sharpen people's class-consciousness?

2. Throughout the book, Lenin outlines some key characteristics that a revolutionary party should meet in order to be capable of leading the working class to socialism:

- a. Be a party of the entire working class, not just the most "revolutionary" section
- b. Help working people convince themselves by their own personal experiences of the need for socialism
- c. Must use and have experience in all means of struggle that move the working class forward towards socialism
- d. Be immersed and active in all the struggles of the working class

How do inflexible or ultra-left tactics help or hinder a revolutionary party from fulfilling these characteristics?

3. Are elections just about getting a Communist or progressive elected to office? What ways does Lenin outline that Communists should use elections to as a way to further the ideas of socialism while at the same time helping to meet the immediate needs of working people?

4. Lenin calls for a sober and objective look at the conditions when it comes to electoral work and compromises- that we cannot rule out forming alliances with our enemies and working on campaigns of non-Communist candidates when necessary in order to advance the struggle for socialism. How does this relate to our position when it comes to the Democrats?

# Facilitator's Guide

## Facilitator's Guide

The information provided in the facilitator's guide is meant to be used to guide you in the direction of the important points that the questions are meant to cover. It is not meant to be the final answer on any of the questions, but rather it should serve as a guide to make the discussion of the group as effective and beneficial as possible.

The guide is split up into three parts. Page numbers and some of the topics that correspond with the questions in each section are provided. This will help you in guiding people back to the specific parts of the text that are being discussed.

## Section I

Chapters 1-5 (23pp) *The Dangers of Opportunism and Ultra-Leftism*

pg. 7 Significance of the Russian Revolution

pgs. 10-11 Discipline and unity in the Communist Movement

pg. 17 Opportunism/anarchism/petty bourgeois revolutionaries

pgs. 20-23 Intro to formulating strategy and tactics

pgs. 27-28 Disunity only helps the bourgeoisie

**1. Can you note tendencies today to universalize or romanticize the strategy and tactics of different progressive and revolutionary movements around the world? If so, what dangers would this pose for the working class movement in the United States?**

Often, some on the Left, particularly youth, tend to romanticize the revolutions of the past or of other nations without really understanding what conditions brought such events or why revolutionary leaders (whether it be Lenin, Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, or whoever) followed the course they did. Simply trying to imitate the slogans, symbols, or tactics of other times and places does not serve to move the struggle forward in the United States today. This is not to say that there are not valuable lessons to be learned from the revolutionary experiences of other workers or from U.S. workers in the past. For example, Lenin says in the first chapter that a lot can be learned from the Russian Revolution, but it is not a model for all other countries to follow down to the last detail. Social change in the U.S. has to rise out of the conditions and struggles that the working class is facing today. If we don't look at our history and understand what people are willing to do in the movement, then we risk using tactics that alienate working people or do not actually further our struggle.

**2. What are the three conditions that Lenin outlines for a revolutionary party of the working class to meet? What is the relationship between these three principles and the development of strategy and tactics?**

(pgs. 10-11) Though not a schematic formula, Lenin provides some general ideas on how a

Communist Party's discipline and effectiveness can be tested. He puts forward three fundamental conditions:

1. As the political organization of the working class, and consisting of the class's most dedicated fighters, the party should always display the *highest level of class consciousness*. This means that the Party should always *uphold the interests of the whole working class* and fight for those interests. Lenin says it should demonstrate "perseverance, self-sacrifice, and heroism." It should be devoted to and always raising awareness of the necessity for the working class struggle to free itself from capitalism--i.e. to fight for socialism.
2. Secondly, the party is tested by its ability to help *build the broadest possible unity*--first of all with the working class, but also just as importantly with the larger forces for social change. For example, in our country, this would include all African-Americans, Latinos, and other nationally and racially oppressed peoples, women, and youth, not just those that are working class.
3. Finally, Lenin says that the correctness of the Party's leadership in the working class is tested by whether or not *working people become convinced by their own experience that the Party's strategy and tactics are correct*. In other words, by how closely the Party's strategy and tactics are connected to the real needs and experiences of the whole class.

The three conditions that Lenin outlines give a guide to developing strategy and tactics. Are the tactics being used in the best interest of the working class or will they be setting the movement back? Are the tactics employed building the broadest unity possible or creating division and only resonating with a small group of people? Are the tactics being used getting working people involved in concrete struggles so they can become convinced of the need for socialism through their own experiences? We must be able to look at the tactics and strategy employed in our struggles and we would have to answer yes to all of these questions if we are truly being a revolutionary party for the working class.

When thinking about what the role and nature of the Communist Party is, there are more things that we would list. Lenin chose to focus on these three areas because they specifically deal with the issue of strategy and tactics. Other defining features of the Communist Party are:

1. A Party of Democratic Centralism
2. A Party of Socialism
3. A Party of Proletarian Internationalism

### **3. How might we define ultra-leftism? How might we define opportunism? What are some of the current manifestations of these political trends?**

Ultra-leftism is a political trend that makes demands and uses tactics that are further left than where people are or may be willing to take. The demands and tactics put forward by ultra-leftists don't take into account the mood of the people and the objective circumstances. They are usually based more on desires and feelings rather than what is really possible and needed to make change. Some examples would be refusing to participate in elections because they are "bourgeois" in general, refusing to work with unions because they don't advocate for socialism or always take up causes that are Left.

Opportunism is a political trend that makes demands and formulates tactics that are behind what is possible. This is usually in reference to right opportunism, making demands and formulating tactics that are move in a right wing direction. Examples of this would be not confronting racist attitudes, advocating for teach-ins when people are demanding direct action, not believing that the working class state power is necessary or believing that capitalism should be reformed and not abolished.

**4. Can we have compromises and retreats and still move the struggle forward on whatever issue we are working on? If so, why would a revolutionary movement need to make a compromise or retreat? Could you think of any examples from today?**

We make compromises and retreats and still make progress on our goal. As Lenin stated, movements may need to actually make a retreat because the forces of social progress either aren't organized enough or are too weak to move forward. The important thing that Lenin noted when making a retreat or compromise is to analyze what the outcomes of making the retreat or compromise are. We would need to base this on a premise of whether or not a certain move would help or hinder the long term goal you are trying to reach. If a retreat is necessary in order to regroup and reorganize in order to further the movement for social progress down the road, then it would be acceptable. In the course of struggle, you are not always moving forward. You will move forward, zig-zag and have to make retreats. We need to have tactics that correspond when the movement is going forward and when the movement is making a retreat.

Some examples from today are having teach-ins rather than large, national demonstrations because you need to regroup and build up a larger base. Today, the union movement is under severe attacks from the right wing and corporations. In negotiations, they are on the retreat fighting to give up only small concessions in order to hold the union together to move forward when there is a more union friendly climate. This would be another example of a necessary retreat and principled compromise.

**5. Do we see modern manifestations of Lenin's argument around the supposed difference between the leaders of movements and the masses?**

We do see modern day arguments of this type. Some people on the Left argue against union leaders instead of company bosses. They say that the union leadership has sold out and are only out to make money for themselves rather than protecting and fighting for the needs of their members. These arguments are attempts to split unions and put the blame of the current situation of the labor movement on the backs of workers rather than seeing the company bosses as the enemy.

Some on the Left argue against the leadership in general and of the Communist Party and other political organizations in particular. They promote the revolutionary nature of the "mass movement" in a vague sense. Others place more emphasis on the actions and revolutionary consciousness of the individual over collective struggle. These arguments lead to individualism that only splits and weakens the mass movements.

## **6. Could we achieve socialism without a political party of the working class?**

We would not be able to achieve socialism without a revolutionary political party of the working class. In mass struggle and through our own experiences, we are able to come to what Lenin called trade union consciousness (the understanding of organizing on the job to fight company bosses) and class consciousness (the understanding of the working class as an economic and political class and to become champions of it) but not necessarily socialist consciousness (becoming a Marxist and understanding and applying Marxism). Today, there is a great deal of literature put out by socialists and communists that is readily available and able to bring the ideas of Marxism to huge sections of the population. People, while in the course of struggle, and through reading these works are able to begin to develop what Lenin would categorize as a socialist consciousness. However, a person would not come to a full understanding of Marxism by only engaging in mass struggle and reading a few books here and there. You would need long study, both through mass struggle and learning Marxist theory, in order to fully develop a socialist consciousness. This is only accomplished through the work of a political party of the working class guided by Marxism.

A Communist Party doesn't bring people to a socialist consciousness by just talking about socialism. People are won over by our strategic goal and tactics that we use in order to achieve what we are fighting for. It is through the Party's strategic goal and the tactics used to go from where you are today to socialism in the future that will help develop people's political consciousness and attract people to Marxism.

We have seen in some instances, such as in Cuba, where a revolutionary movement involved a Marxist-Leninist Party and another working class organizations. You can have revolutionary movements that are socialist in nature where Communist Parties can play a leading role with other socialist organizations that may not be Marxist-Leninist. You even have revolutionary governments that are trying to build socialism today that are not lead by a political party guided by Marxism. However, in the long run, you would still need a political party of the working class that is guided by Marxism in order to achieve socialism and develop a socialist consciousness among the vast majority of people.

Mass movements without political or organizational leadership are generally spontaneous in nature and not necessarily focused on the long term. To achieve socialism we would need a party that has a long-term perspective that connects the immediate struggles of today to a longer term plan to achieve socialism.

Mass movements, because of their very nature, have many different political trends and outlooks, even mass movements that are for socialism. We should welcome different perspectives and ideas as we are all working to a common goal. To achieve socialism though we need to a party that was specifically of the working class and pushing forward the demands of the entire class. If we were to achieve socialism, we would also need a place that would develop new leaders and organizers that would be able to carry on the struggle. A mass movement without a political party or leadership would not be able to do this.

## **7. How would the ultra-right and big business benefit from a split between the leaders and masses of progressive and revolutionary movements?**

Responsible leaders are behind a movement's ability to progress because they give direction to progressive and revolutionary movements. Leaders are more likely to have long term goals in mind when analyzing necessary tactics in the short term.

Lenin, when critiquing this idea and outlining the dangers of causing a split between the masses and the leaders, says “, "What the opposition (those who argue against leadership, *Ed/Lit*), *has come to* is the repudiation of the party principle and of party discipline. And this is tantamount to completely disarming the proletariat *for the benefit of the bourgeoisie*. It is tantamount to that petty-bourgeois diffuseness, instability, incapacity for sustained effort, unity and organised action, which, if indulged in, must inevitably destroy every proletarian revolutionary movement." (p. 28)

## **Section II**

Chapter 6-8 (29pp.) *Marxist Strategy and Tactics: Moving the Struggle Forward*

pgs. 35-38 Working at the level where the masses are  
pgs. 40-42 The mistakes of the ultra-left's approach to electoral politics  
pgs. 44-45 No tactic is permanent- Flexibility is key  
pgs. 46-48 Foundation for correct strategies and tactics  
pgs. 49-53 "There are compromises and there are compromises"  
pgs. 56 Tactics that unite, not divide

### **1. Why is it important for a party of the working class to be active and have members of trade unions , even reactionary ones? What can Communists who are within a reactionary trade union do to change its direction in a unifying way?**

As Lenin argues in this chapter, Communists must work within the organizations of the working class and be struggling side by side with *all* working people. It is trade unions that unite all the different parts of the working class into one organization. (people of color, women, youth, white workers, men etc.) To not work within these organizations would be to ignore the everyday struggles to make life better for working people. Communists must fight for the needs of the entire working class, even those that may not agree with us at first.

To make the argument that a person should not work within a trade union because it is "reactionary" would mean to leave the trade unionists at the mercy of the reactionaries and under the influence of conservative leaders. Lenin argues that Communists need an ever larger and more active presence in reactionary trade unions because we need to be there to struggle against the reactionary ideology and not concede that people can't be struggled with.

Party members and YCLers who are in a position to be involved with the organized labor movement should take every opportunity to do so. They should not be reluctant simply because their union local is conservative, or they disagree with the union's political activities (or lack

thereof). They should work in the union and try to change its activities and direction from within, as a member of the local and/or in a leadership position if they are elected.

**2. Can a Communist Party only work with the most "advanced" and "revolutionary" sections of the working class? Why do we need to struggle alongside people who do not have "Left" or progressive stances on different issues?**

A Communist Party is not a party of only one section of the working class. A Communist Party is a party of the entire class, even those that are not progressive or revolutionary. We struggle for the betterment of the entire class. This means we will have to work with people who are not the most revolutionary or progressive on all issues. We take principled stands against racism, sexism, homophobia and other forms of discrimination. We also reach out to struggle with people who may not be as advanced on these questions as we are. Writing people off and refusing to try and struggle together with them means that we are conceding that people can't change (that people who are racist will always be racist, for example). We know that we can only change the minds of people and win them over to being progressive and revolutionary if we struggle with them on different issues. You don't win people to the Communist Party and to socialism by telling them they are not good enough for the Communist Party.

**3. Can we make fundamental, long-term social change in the United States without participating in electoral politics?**

Electoral struggle is one tactic that we have to make change. We have other tactics like boycotting, striking, mass protests, sit-ins and demonstrations. To make long-term fundamental change in the United States we need to be able to employ all of these at the right moment. We need to be able to gauge which tactic and form of struggle at the particular time is going to move the greatest amount of people into action for progressive change. For many issues, we need to combine electoral struggle along with the other tactics in order to make change. We need the protests, sit-ins, and demonstrations to make our voices heard by elected officials and others that we are struggling against as well as having elected officials that are pushing our demands forward in government.

If we solely use electoral struggle, then we are not doing enough to get people involved in mass movements and leaving it up to our elected officials to make change. This disempowers people and does not put people in charge of making the fundamental change they want. If we don't participate in electoral struggle, then we are forced to simply march in D.C. or sit-in the offices of a politician that refuses to listen to us. For many cases, we need people who are in government that are going to represent our demands and ensure that they get addressed. It would be ineffective to have a huge mass movement without people in power that are going to listen to (or be pressured to be listened to) the demands that we make and be forced to take action.

To end the war in Iraq, to create a universal healthcare system and to make higher education affordable for everyone will require massive changes in government and existing laws. Having huge demonstrations in DC on one day or chaining yourself to your Congressperson's office door will send a message that people want change, but it will take elected officials introducing the bills and making the new laws to create this change. It would be extremely difficult to impossible

to end war in Iraq when Congress and the President are pro-war. How hard will it be to make higher education affordable if there is no one in Congress that is pushing to lower college tuition and increase the amount of grant money students can get? Having people that will listen to progressive demands and take action on it, will make change happen faster than if we refuse to help elected people that agree with us or can be pushed into a more progressive stance.

#### **4. What are some of the arguments that Lenin makes for the need for Communists and revolutionaries to participate in electoral struggle, even if they personally feel that it is "obsolete"?**

As with the crafting of all other tactics, Communists have to take a sober look at the current conditions to determine the correctness of electoral policies. Simply because some Communists or people on the Left may feel that the time for engaging in electoral politics has passed or that being "in the streets" is the only way to challenge capitalism does not make it so.

Lenin cautions revolutionaries to avoid confusing what they *wish* was the political situation for what it really is. Tactics that are either too advanced or too far behind existing conditions will leave us out in the cold and isolated from the broad movements. This is just as true for electoral tactics as for any other. Lenin reminds Communists that they must never ignore any area of struggle simply because they think it may not be revolutionary enough. As he says, denouncing capitalist politicians and elections can be easy, but true "revolutionary tactics cannot be built up on revolutionary moods alone."

Lenin also talks about the need for a Communist Party to be where the masses of people are. Today in the United States, the vast majority of people participates in elections and uses it as a way to voice their support or opposition to what's happening politically. People also view elections as the most legitimate way to make changes in government or policy. To not get involved in electoral struggle then would be to separate ourselves from where working class people and the forms of the struggle that bring together the broadest section people.

We also need to have members of the Communist Party in trade unions and members of the Young Communist League in student groups and student government to be struggling side by side with other workers and young people. We can't be a leader if we are not in the mix struggling with people on the day-to-day struggles that we all face.

While of course, as Communists, we do not see electoral politics as the only way to win in struggles for social change. In different times and places, the world Communist movement has led and been involved in mass mobilizations around various issues and have employed numerous tactics, including strikes, civil disobedience, demonstrations, community organizing, and countless other forms of resistance and struggle. But in formulating our approach for the contemporary United States, it is clear that electoral struggle is one of the primary arenas of the class struggle. As a part of the working class, it is therefore our responsibility to be involved in the battles going on at the ballot box.

### Section III.

Chapters 9-10 (25pp.) *Revolutionary Enthusiasm: Avoiding the Mistakes of the Past*

pgs. 61-62 Revolutionary Enthusiasm

pgs. 65-66 Realistic necessities for revolutionary change

pg. 69 Running Communist candidates/Electoral Strategy

pg. 73-76 Linking the YCL and Communist Party up with the broader movement for change

#### **1. Why is it important for people to have their own practical experience in political struggle? How does participating in different areas of struggle such as elections and in trade unions help to elevate and sharpen people's class-consciousness?**

People will not come to socialism simply through reading books or listening to speeches. For many people that do come to socialism through this vehicle, they tend to not have a grasp on the practical work needed to achieve socialism and end up formulating tactics and strategies that don't correspond to where people are. People can't learn to organize unions, how to run large campaigns, or how to run for office if they don't have the practical and everyday experience in doing this.

In having the everyday experience, people are able to elevate their own consciousness and understanding of why socialism is necessary. For example, working in your union gives you practical experience in the ways in which a company tries to exploit workers and the ways in which unions fight for the rights of working people. You wouldn't learn how to lead a union campaign or strike by simply reading a book, nor would you gain the experience and understanding of how capitalism works from reading a book. People need to be convinced of the negative impacts of capitalism on their everyday life. The only way to do that is to have people engaged in practical struggles on the issues that impact them and the working class.

Participating in elections and electoral struggle helps to raise the political consciousness of people in different ways. For one, if you are out knocking on doors of union workers talking to them about the issues, you are gaining invaluable experience in how to talk with people about politics and gain a deeper understanding of the issues that are important to people.

If we want to run Communists for office one day, we need to have people who are experienced in running election campaigns. We can't get that from reading a book, but only through our own active engagement with a campaign. People need to have the experience of winning campaigns to bring home the idea that we can make change. Capitalism fosters an attitude in working people that they aren't able to make change. That our votes don't matter and that we should not be out in the streets protesting and demanding change. However, by winning in elections and other arenas, people build up their confidence as agents of change. Winning reforms and victories, both large and small, embolden people to take further action to win even greater victories.

Another way that electoral struggle raises consciousness is through what happens once someone is elected. We know that the problems facing working people won't be solved by electing a Democrat because capitalism is the problem. People will need to have the experience of electing Democrats and seeing how far they are able to go in order to make change to help come to a realization of what the fundamental problems are. If people don't have that experience, then we still have to struggle further to get people to understand that the problem is capitalism, not just who is elected to government.

**2. Throughout the book, Lenin outlines some key characteristics that a revolutionary party should meet in order to be capable of leading the working class to socialism:**

- a. Be a party of the entire working class, not just the most "revolutionary" section**
- b. Help working people convince themselves by their own personal experiences of the need for socialism**
- c. Must use and have experience in all means of struggle that move the working class forward towards socialism**
- d. Be immersed and active in all the struggles of the working class**

**How do inflexible or ultra-left tactics help or hinder a revolutionary party from fulfilling these characteristics?**

Ultra-left tactics isolate us from the masses of working people so that we end up not being able to work with all working people, but only people who agree with us or the tactic that we are using. Ultra-left tactics such as not participating in elections or reactionary trade unions deprive people of the necessary practical and everyday experience that is needed in order to convince themselves of how messed up capitalism is. If we only use tactics that are deemed "revolutionary" like boycotting or striking, then we are limiting what tactics we can use to move the struggle forward. If we aren't involved in the forms of struggle that bring together the broadest sections of working people or involved in the organizations that broad sections of working people are in, then we are cutting ourselves off from working people and the issues that the majority of the working class feels is important.

**3. Are elections just about getting a Communist or progressive elected to office? What ways does Lenin outline that Communists should use elections to as a way to further the ideas of socialism while at the same time helping to meet the immediate needs of working people?**

For Communists, elections are not just about getting a Communist or progressive into office. While we can't discount the importance of getting a progressive elected to office and what that would mean for the immediate struggles, we know that elections are a means to further the struggle for socialism, not just an end.. Elections provide a unique time and political situation that we can capitalize on. Everyone will be talking about politics, what the issues facing our country are and how to solve them. This provides the perfect opportunity for Communists to get our own ideas and slogans out on what we think are the problems and the solutions that we demand. This gives us a chance to talk about needed reforms but not in a reformist way. We are able to use the issues impacting people and what is needed to change them in order deepen political consciousness and understanding In order to take advantage of this, Lenin writes that we

need to be everywhere that the masses are (in unions, taverns, communities) knocking on doors and talking with people. We need to be discussing the issues with people and elevating people's consciousness. We need to be pulling new people into the political struggle so that they can have their own experiences to help raise their understanding.

Elections also give us a chance to clearly outline and define who is the enemy and who are our allies. In our elections we are able to clearly articulate how the ultra-right is the main enemy and how the Republicans are the ones to blame for the continuing war in Iraq, how they are behind the vicious attacks on immigrants and how they are the ones slashing funding for education. The national debates on policy that happen during the election can be used as a political education tool. We can discuss whom exactly benefits from the way things are and who is hurt by the policies pursued by the ultra-right.

Lenin even gives the example of how to use the support of a non-Communist candidate to talk to workers (pg. 69 and 70). That if I were to go and talk to workers about my support of a Democrat, I'd actually be able to get a foot in the door than if I was supporting a Communist. This opening would then allow me to discuss our position on the issues, what we think is wrong, the importance of the election and how we need socialism in order solve the problems we face.

While we won't be going door to door on a specific campaign talking about the issues and then slipping in a conversation about socialism, we can use other venues such as speaking engagements on campuses or issue forums to express our ideas. We can use these venues to discuss the issues and give our perspective and analysis on problems and the solutions. We can talk about our approach to the elections and how they are related to our fight for socialism.

Lenin also writes that elections give us a time to talk about the need for socialism. We can talk to people about voting for progressive and non-Communist candidates and why it is necessary but that it won't solve all the problems we face. In the United States, this means that people need to have the experience of living under a Democratically controlled government for them to understand that this would be a big advancement over a government controlled by the ultra-right. People would also come to understand the limitations of the Democrats and see that they aren't able to solve the fundamental and deeper problems that we face. To move to socialism, people need have this political experience in order to change their minds and come to an understanding for the need to get rid of capitalism. As Lenin said "revolution is impossible without a change in the views of the majority of the working class, and this change is brought about by the political experience of the masses, and never by propaganda alone" (p. 66).

**4. Lenin calls for a sober and objective look at the conditions when it comes to electoral work and compromises- that we cannot rule out forming alliances with our enemies and working on campaigns of non-Communist candidates when necessary in order to advance the struggle for socialism. How does this relate to our position when it comes to the Democrats?**

Some within the broader Left and sometimes within our own Party or the YCL question why we work with and help elect candidates of the Democratic Party, which is not a workers' party. It is sometimes asked, "Why not work with/for some of the independent or third party candidates,

which may have views closer to our own?" Or "Why not run Communist candidates and vote only for them?" To retreat into such notions might make us feel better about ourselves, but it would lead us to make the same mistakes that the German "Lefts" made.

As Communists, we have to take a realistic look at where the working class in the U.S. is engaged in struggle and what is going to be the best way to move that struggle to the next stage. We see the ultra-right as the main obstacle in the advancement of socialism. The ultra-right is characterized by the most extreme forms of transnational capitalism. It is the ultra-right that promotes the policy of unending war, attacks on education, attacks on the labor movement, on immigrants, etc. In order to defeat the ultra-right, we must build a broad and united front that not only includes the working class, the racially and nationally oppressed, women and youth but everyone that is against the policies of the ultra-right, including parts of the capitalist class. This is where the Democratic Party comes in. We know that the Democratic Party is part of the capitalist class, but there are differences between the Democratic Party and the Republican Party that we can take advantage of and use to further the demands of working people. By taking advantage of these splits and widening them, we are able to weaken the capitalist class a whole, not just the ultra-right. The defeat of the ultra-right would not only advance our struggle by removing right-wing politicians, but would also be a blow to the entire capitalist class.

At the current time, one of the key sites of the class struggles is in the electoral arena, with the organized working class and other key forces working within the orbit of the Democratic Party to beat the ultra-right. Do we see working with the Democrats as our strategy forever? Do we think the Democrats are going to lead the struggle for socialism in the U.S.? No, of course not. As objective conditions change, so must our strategy and tactics. Once the ultra-right is defeated, eventually the time will come to adjust our electoral policies. We are working now and will continue to work to strengthen the role and independence of the labor movement and the organizations of the racially and nationally oppressed, women and youth in order to create a viable third party that is lead by the working class. But that time has not yet come, which is why we must work to help build the broadest possible unity to achieve the goal of the defeat of the ultra-right. At this time, that still means operating around Democratic candidates in most areas.

# Index

**Bolsheviks-** Political Party that formed out of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party along with the Mensheviks. Reunited with the Mensheviks in 1905 and 1906 and then split away again. Believed that the working class of Russia had to be in the lead of a socialist revolution but also had to involve the poor peasantry. Believed that the 1905 revolution was a bourgeois revolution and allowed the bourgeoisie to develop in Russia. Supported the provisional government formed in Feb. 1917 because it was an advance over tsarism but also worked to build a socialist revolution. Stating that the time was right for a socialist revolution and that the provisional government could not address the needs of the Russian people, the Bolshevik Party advocated for the overthrow of the provisional and Coalition Governments starting in April 1917. The Bolsheviks from April 1917 up to September 29<sup>th</sup>, 1917 advocated for a peaceful means and not armed struggle. The Bolshevik Party led the revolution of October 1917.

**Brest-Litovsk Treaty-** Treaty signed by the Soviet government in 1917 to end the war between Germany and Russia.

**Communard Blanquist-** Louis Auguste Blanqui (1805-1881), a French revolutionary. Blaqui believed that small groups of revolutionaries would be able to get rid of capitalism and build socialism. He led three unsuccessful attempts to overthrow the French government.

**Dictatorship of the Proletariat-** a term first used by Marx and Engels and then expanded upon by Lenin. This is when the government and state are controlled by the working class and its allies to bring about massive social and economic reform and extend political democracy.

**Fabians-** A British reformist organization started in 1884 named after the Roman General Quintus Fabius Maximus. The group believed that socialism could be brought about by minor, gradual reforms to capitalism. During WWI, the group took a social-chauvinist position and supported Britain's entry into the war.

**Freiderich Adler** (1879-1960)- Assassinated Austrian Prime Minister in 1916 and was a leader in the Austrian Social Democratic Party. Along with **Otto Bauer**, Adler suppressed the worker's movement and the Communist Party of Austria in the new state of Germany-Austria in 1919.

**Arthur Henderson** (1863-1935)- A right-wing Labour Party Politician. Supported England's involvement in WWI and a member of Lloyd George's War Cabinet. He also supported the move to not allow the Communist Party to affiliate with the Labour Party in 1920. Helped to revive the Second International in the 1920's.

**Rudolph Hilferding** (1877-1941)- A leading member of the German Social Democratic Party and a critic of Marxist economics before WWI. He was a pacifist and joined the Independent Social Democrats because of his opposition to the WWI.

**Independent Labor Party-** a reformist party founded in 1893 during the active strike movement and mounting drive for the independence of the British working class from the bourgeois parties.

Dedicated most of its energies to parliamentary forms of struggle and made deals with the Liberal Party. Initially took a stand against World War I, but then took a social-chauvinist position.

**Industrial Workers of the World (IWW)**- founded in 1905 by progressives, socialists, anarchists and radicals because of their opposition to the policies of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) at that time. From its founding until now, the main tactic used to achieve their goals is the general strike. The IWW's competition with the AFL and the refusal to use flexible tactics severely limited its ability to create unions in workplaces that would make an impact on the lives of the workers. In most cases, after a successful strike the employer would be able to wear down the employees and reverse any gains made because of a lack of a contract.

**Karl Kautsky** (1854-1938)- A friend and fellow revolutionary of Marx and Engels. Became a leader and one of the main theoreticians of the German Social Democratic Party arguing against the right wing of the Party. Kautsky initially supported Germany's entry into WWI because he thought it was a war against tsarism and that capitalism would not allow a war to continue for long. He then withdrew his support. He advocated against the development of socialism in Russia after 1917.

**Alexander Kerensky** (1882-1970)- a member of the Socialist Revolutionary Party (SR) in Russia. The Socialist Revolutionaries believed in the use of terrorism and that it was the peasantry, not the working class that would lead the revolution. As a member of the Cadets, he was the leader of the provisional government in Russia, which promised to continue to fight in WWI. The government's continuing policy of war and inability to deal with the domestic issues lead to its overthrow in 1917. Went into exile in the United States.

**Lloyd George**- Liberal Prime Minister of England from 1916-1922. There was a fight between himself and the Liberal Prime Minister of England, Asquith for power. Lloyd George was able to split the Liberal Party and make an alliance with the Conservatives to become Prime Minister in 1916.

**Longuetism**- A political trend named after the French Socialist Jean-Laurent-Frederick Longuet, the grandson of Karl Marx. He was a pacifist at the start of WWI but eventually supported France's involvement in the war.

**Labor Aristocracy**- Lenin uses the term to refer to a small section of workers in the advanced countries (often coinciding with the leadership of certain unions) who enjoy a higher standard of living due to the increased wages that companies are able to pay them out of the superprofits earned in foreign production. This section of workers become co-opted by the capitalist class and begin to see their interests as coinciding more with the capitalists of their own country than with the workers in other lands. Lenin felt that this was only a small section of workers and momentary. With capitalism always driving to maximize profits, the relative prosperous conditions that some workers have would not be able to last in the long run.

**Mensheviks**- Formed during the split of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party. The Party split into two different political trends, the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks. The Mensheviks argued that it was only the working class that should lead and complete a socialist revolution in Russia.

They called for a "stagist" approach that said Russia had to overthrow the Tsar and have a bourgeois revolution that would last for a long time to develop capitalism before there could be a socialist revolution. They supported the provisional government formed after Feb. 1917 and thought this would start the development of a bourgeois democracy that was the next stage to get to socialism. They also backed the provisional government in continuing Russia's involvement in WWI.

**Petite Bourgeoisie**- small business owners.

**Georgi Plekhanov** (1856-1918)- A once friend and comrade of Lenin, Plekhanov supported Russia's involvement in WWI. Though one of the founders of Russian Marxism, he argued against the project of attempting to build socialism in Russia. He thought that Russia had to go through a long period of bourgeois government. He attacked and worked against the founding of the Soviet government in 1917.

**Samuel Gompers** (1850-1924)- One of the primary founders of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and its president until his death. He opposed efforts to organize industrial unions, preferring craft-based federations and was one of the earliest supporters of linking the AFL with the Democratic Party. Beginning as an advocate for socialism, Gompers turned into a strong opponent of socialism and the influence of leftists within the AFL. Gompers enthusiastically supported the entry of the United States into WWI.

**Second International**- Founded in 1889 with the help of Engels, it was a federation of the world's socialist political parties. The Second International began as avidly Marxist. Seen as a way to develop international socialist revolutions by cutting across international boundaries and uniting the worldwide working class. Collapsed at the beginning of World War I because member groups in France, Germany, and England took up a social-chauvinist position supporting their countries' involvement in the war. It was revived as the Socialist International in the early 1920's with an anti-communist political platform.

**Scheidemanns**- Phillip Scheidemann (1865-1939) was a leader of the right wing of the German Social Democratic Party.

**Phillip Snowden** (1864-1967) a member of the Independent Labor Party in Britain.

**Social-chauvinism (or social patriotism)**- A term referring to national chauvinism expressed by socialists or social democrats, characterized by aggressive or fanatical patriotism, particularly in times of war. Most Socialist Parties expressed such "social chauvinism" during WWI, supporting their countries' involvement in the war.

**Social Democracy**- the term used to define the politics of most of the socialist parties from the time of Marx and Engels to the end of the Second International. Social-Democrats were for economic and political democracy, the overthrow of capitalism and a society run by and for the working class. The Social-Democratic parties that split with the Second International over social-chauvinism stopped using the term and started referring to themselves as Communists.

There are still political parties that are Social Democratic in different countries today. These parties range from those on the left that have allied themselves with Communists, progressives and are very pro-worker to those on the right that are anti-communist and anti-Marxist.

**Social-imperialism-** Used to refer to the policies of countries that are governed by socialist or social-democratic parties (ostensibly anti-imperialist organizations) that either support or undertake imperialist projects of their own.

**Soviets-** means council. There were Soviets for soldiers, workers and peasants. The local Soviets would have representatives from the different Soviets. Most of the people who served on the Soviets were not full time politicians but had full-time jobs outside of politics.

**Socialist Revolutionaries-** Often referred to as the "SR's," this political party was a peasant-based organization founded in Russia in the late 1800s. The SR's believed that the peasants, not the working class, were the revolutionary class in Russia. They favored redistribution of property ownership from a few landlords to the individual peasants, or "land-socialization," but were opposed to common public ownership of land, which the Bolsheviks proposed. Terrorist tactics, including assassination, were a key part of their political strategy for many years. After the first revolution of 1917, the SR's allied themselves with the main bourgeois parties and had one of their former members, Alexander Kerensky, elected head of government. After the October Revolution, the left wing of the SR Party split to support the Bolsheviks. However, some SR's, unhappy over the signing of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, unsuccessfully attempted an uprising against the Bolshevik government in 1918. They once again returned to violence, assassinating the German ambassador and attempting to kill Lenin. Many SR's joined the opposition in the Civil War. Most of those SR's who disagreed with these tactics ended up joining the Communist Party.

**Sophist-** One who uses complicated and confusing arguments to deceive others or win their support to a position which they would not otherwise endorse.

**Sparticists-** a split from the German Social Democratic Party that was formed in 1919 by Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, Clara Zetkins, and others. Stood against social chauvinism and against WWI. Later became the Communist Party of Germany.

**Third International-** Also known as the Communist International or Comintern. Founded on Lenin's proposal in Moscow in 1919, the Third International was a worldwide alliance of the parties and movements that had refused to follow the social-chauvinist policies of the parties grouped around the Second International (see above). Most of these parties had been formed following the opportunist support many social democratic parties had given to the imperialist policies of WWI. Many of the Communist Parties that were members of the Third International were the early foundation of what is today known as the world Communist movement, though it is today much larger and diverse than in 1919. The Third International was dissolved in 1943 during WWII.

**Filippo Turati (1857-1932)-** "Turatis" in the text refers to Filippo Turati and those who supported opportunist policies similar to his. Turati was one of the founders of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI). He did not believe in revolutionary politics, but thought the only path to

socialism was through gradual reformist efforts via parliament. Turati opposed WWI, but also opposed the growing radicalization of Italian workers and split along with his followers who made up the right wing of the PSI. One of the members of this right wing of the PSI was Benito Mussolini, who soon left to found the Fascist Party. The left faction of the PSI was refounded as the Italian Communist Party (PCI).

**Versailles Peace Treaty**- The treaty that officially ended WWI, signed in November of 1918. The terms of the treaty, which were elaborated by the victorious imperialist countries (U.S., U.K., France) were especially harsh on defeated Germany. Germany was forced to accept full blame for the war and completely disarm. The treaty also required Germany to give up many of its colonial territories and pay reparations to the other imperialist powers.

# Feedback Form

\*\* When completed, please mail to: Education Department-YCLUSA 235 West 23<sup>rd</sup> Street NY, NY 10011 \*\*

Club Name: \_\_\_\_\_

How many sessions did you use to cover Left Wing Communism?

Do you feel that the questions used in the study guide were effective in helping your club understand the main points of Left Wing Communism?

Did the answers provided within the Facilitator's Guide help guide/give direction to the discussions in your club?

Did you find the answers understandable and accessible?

Which part of the study guide did your club/you find most effective? Which did you find the least effective?

(use other side for any other comments or suggestions)