

Herman Gorter

# Open Letter to Comrade Lenin

---

**First published:** *Open letter to comrade Lenin, A reply to “left-wing’ communism, an infantile disorder,”* in *Workers’ Dreadnought*, London, 12 March-11 June 1921;

**Published:** Wildcat pamphlet, London, 1989;

**Source:** [Left-Wing Communism Site](#);

**Transcription\HTML Markup:** by [Andy Blunden](#), for marxists.org 2003; Micah Muer, 2019

**Proofread:** by Chris Clayton, 2006;

---

I wish to draw your attention, Comrade Lenin, and that of the reader, to the fact that this letter was written at the time of the triumphant march of the Russians to Warsaw.

I likewise request you, and the reader, to excuse the frequent repetitions. They were unavoidable, owing to the fact that the tactics of the “Lefts” are still unknown to the workers of most countries.

*Herman Gorter.*

---

## Contents

1. [Introduction](#)
  2. [The question of the trade unions](#)
  3. [Parliamentarism](#)
  4. [Opportunism in the Third International](#)
  5. [Conclusion](#)
  6. [Notes](#)
- 

## Introduction

Dear Comrade Lenin,

I have read your brochure on the Radicalism in the Communist movement. It has taught me a great deal, as all your writings have done. For this I feel grateful to you, and doubtless many other comrades feel as I do. Many a trace, and many a germ of this infantile disease, to which without a doubt, I also am a victim, has been chased away by your brochure, or will yet be eradicated by it. Your observations about the confusion that revolution has caused in many brains, is quite right too. I know that. The revolution came so suddenly, and in a way so utterly different from what we expected. Your words will be an incentive to me, once again, and to an even greater extent than

before, to base my judgement in all matters of tactics, also in the revolution, exclusively on reality, on the actual class-relations, as they manifest themselves politically and economically.

After having read your brochure I thought all this is right.

But after having considered for a long time whether I would cease to uphold this “Left Wing,” and to write articles for the KAPD and the Opposition party in England, I had to decline.

### **Basis Mistaken.**

This seems contradictory. It is due, though, to the fact that the starting-point in the brochure is not right. To my idea you are mistaken in your judgement regarding the analogy of the West-European revolution with the Russian one, regarding the conditions of the West-European revolution, that is to say the class-relations, and this leads you to mistake the cause, from which this Left Wing, the opposition, originates.

Therefore the brochure SEEMS to be right, as long as your starting-point is assumed. If, however (as it should be), your starting point is rejected, the entire brochure is wrong. As all your mistaken, and partly mistaken, judgements converge in your condemnation of the Left movement, especially in Germany and England, and as I firmly intend to defend those of the Left Wing, although, as the leaders know, I do not agree with them on all points, I imagine I had best answer your brochure by a defence of the Left Wing. This will enable me not only to point out its origin (the cause from which it springs), and to prove its right, and merits, in the present stage, and here, in Western Europe, but also, which is of equal importance, to combat the mistaken conceptions that are prevalent in Russia with regard to the West-European Revolution.

Both these points are of importance, as it is on the conception of the West-European revolution that the West-European as well as the Russian tactics depend. I should have liked to do this at the Moscow Congress, which, however, I was not able to attend.

### **Two Arguments Refuted.**

In the first place I must refute two of your arguments, that may mislead the judgment of comrades or readers. You scoff and sneer at the ridiculous and childish nonsense of the struggle in Germany, at the “dictatorship of the leaders or of the masses,” at “from above or below,” etc. We quite agree with you, that these should be no questions at all. But we do not agree with your scoffing. For that is the pity of it: in Western Europe they still are questions. In Western Europe we still have, in many countries, leaders of the type of the Second International; here we are still seeking the right leaders, those that **do not try to dominate the masses**, that do not betray them; and as long as we do not find these leaders, we want to do all things from below, and through the dictatorship of the masses themselves. If I have a mountain-guide, and he should lead me into the abyss, I prefer to do without him. As soon as we have found the right guides, we will stop this searching. Then mass and leader will be really one. This, and nothing else, is what the German and English Left Wing, what we ourselves, mean by these words.

And the same holds good for your second remark, that the leader should form one united whole with class and mass. We quite agree with you. But the question is to find and rear leaders that are really one with the masses. This can only be accomplished by the masses, the political parties and the Trade Unions, by means of the most severe struggle, also inwardly. And the same holds good for iron discipline, and strong centralisation. We want them all right, but not until we have the right leaders. This severest of all struggles, which is now being fought most strenuously in Germany and England, the two countries where Communism is nearest to its realisation, can only be harmed by your scoffing. Your attitude panders to the opportunist elements in the Third International. By this scoffing, you abet the opportunist elements in the Third International.

For it is one of the means by which elements in the Spartakus League and in the BSP, and also in the Communist Parties in many other countries, imposes upon the workers, when they say that the entire question of masses and leader is absurd, is “nonsense and childishness.” Through this phrase they avoid, and wish to avoid, all criticism of themselves, the leaders. It is by means of this phrase of an iron discipline and centralisation, that they crush the opposition. And this opportunism is abetted by you.

You should not do this, Comrade. We are only in the introductory stage yet, here in Western Europe. And in that stage it is better to encourage the fighters than the rulers.

I only touch on this quite perfunctorily here. In the course of this writing I will deal with this matter more at length. There is a deeper reason yet why I cannot agree with your brochure. It is the following

### **Difference Between Russia and W. Europe.**

On reading your pamphlets, brochures and books, nearly all of which writings filled us with admiration and approbation, we Marxists of Western Europe invariably came to a point where we suddenly grew wary, and on the look-out for a more detailed explanation; and if we failed to find this explanation, we accepted the statement but grudgingly, with all due reservations. This was your statement regarding the workers and the poor peasants. It occurs often, very often. And you always mention both these categories as revolutionary factors all the world over. And nowhere, at least as far as I have read, is there a clear and outspoken recognition of the immense difference which prevails in the matter between Russia (and a few other countries in Eastern Europe) and Western Europe (that is to say Germany, France, England, Belgium, Holland, Switzerland, and the Scandinavian countries, and perhaps even Italy). And yet, in my opinion, the fundamental difference between your conception of the tactics concerning Trade Unionism and Parliamentarism, and that of the so-called Left Wing in Western Europe, lies mainly in this point.

Of course you know this difference as well as I do, only you failed to draw from it the conclusions for the tactics in Western Europe, at least as far as I am able to judge from your works. These conclusions you have not taken into consideration, and consequently your judgement on these West-European tactics is false.<sup>[1]</sup>

And this is all the more dangerous, because this phrase of yours is parroted automatically in all the Communist Parties of Western Europe, even by Marxists. To judge from all Communist papers, magazines and brochures, and from all public assemblies, one might even surmise that a revolt of the poor peasants in Western Europe might break out at any moment! Nowhere is the great difference with Russia pointed out, and thus the judgment, also of the proletariat, is led astray. Because in Russia you were able to triumph with the help of a large class of poor peasants, you represent things in such a way, as if we in Western Europe are also going to have that help. Because you, in Russia, have triumphed exclusively through this help, you wish to make us believe that here also we will triumph through this help. You do this by means of your silence with regard to this question, as it stands in Western Europe, and your entire tactics are based on this representation.

### **Poor Peasants Decisive Factor.**

This representation, however, is not the truth. There is an enormous difference between Russia and Western Europe. In general the importance of the poor peasants as a revolutionary factor decreases from east to west. In some Parts of Asia, China, and India, in the event of a revolution, this class would be the absolutely decisive factor; in Russia it constitutes an indispensable and, indeed, one of the main factors; in Poland, and in a few states of South-Eastern and Central Europe, it is still of importance for the revolution, but further West its attitude grows ever more antagonistic towards the revolution.

Russia had an industrial proletariat of some seven or eight millions. The number of poor peasants, however, amounted to about 25 millions. (I beg you to excuse the inevitable numerical errors; I have to quote from memory, as this letter should be despatched with all speed). When Kerensky failed to give these poor peasants the soil, you knew that before long they would come to you, the minute they should become aware of the fact. This is not so in Western Europe, and will not become so either; in the countries of Western Europe, which I have named, conditions of that sort do not exist.

The poor peasant here lives under conditions quite different from those of Russia. Though often terrible, they are not as appalling as they were there. As farmers or owners, the poor peasants possess a piece of land. The excellent means of transport enables them often to sell their goods. At the very worst they can mostly provide their own food. During the last ten years things have improved somewhat for them. Now, during and since the war, they can obtain high prices. They are indispensable, the import of foodstuffs being very limited. Regularly, therefore, they will be able to get high prices. They are supported by Capitalism. Capitalism will maintain them, as long as it can maintain itself. In your country, the position of the poor peasants was far more terrible. With you, therefore, the poor peasants had a political, revolutionary programme, and were organised in a political, revolutionary party: with the social-revolutionaries. With us this is nowhere the case. Moreover, in Russia there was an enormous amount of landed property to be divided, large estates, crown lands, government land, and the estates held by the monasteries. But the Communists of Western Europe, what can they offer to the poor peasants, to win them to their side?

## **Nothing to Offer Peasants.**

Germany counted, before the war, from four to five million poor peasants (up to two hectares). Only eight or nine millions, however, were employed in actual large-scale industries (over 100 hectares). If the Communists were to divide all of these, the poor peasants would still be poor peasants, as the seven or eight million field-labourers also claim their share. And they cannot even divide them, as they will use them as large-scale industries.<sup>[2]</sup>

These numbers show that in Western Europe there are comparatively few poor peasants; that, therefore, the auxiliary forces, if there were any at all, would be very few in numbers.

The Communists in Germany, therefore, except in relatively insignificant regions, do not even have the means to win over the poor peasants. For the medium and small industries will surely not be expropriated. And it is practically the same in the case of the four or five million poor peasants in France, and also for Switzerland, Belgium, Holland, and two of the Scandinavian countries.<sup>[3]</sup> Everywhere small and medium sized industry prevails. And even in Italy there is no absolute certainty; not to mention England, which counts only some one or two hundred thousand peasants.

Neither will they be attracted by the promise that under Communism they will be exempt from rent-paying and mortgage-rent. For with Communism they see the approach of civil war, the loss of markets, and general destruction.

Unless, therefore, there should come a crisis far more terrible than the present one in Germany, a crisis, indeed, far exceeding the horrors of any other crises that ever were before, the poor peasants in Western Europe will side with Capitalism, as long as it has any life left.<sup>[4]</sup>

## **Industrial Workers Stand Alone.**

The workers in Western Europe stand all alone. Only a very slight portion of the lower middle class will help them. And these are economically insignificant. The workers will have to make the revolution all by themselves. Here is the great difference as compared to Russia.

Possibly you will say, Comrade Lenin, that this was the case in Russia. There also the proletariat has made the revolution all by itself. It is only after the revolution that the poor peasants joined. You are right, and yet the difference is immense.

You knew with absolute certainty that the peasants would come to you, and that they would come quickly. You knew that Kerensky would not, and could not give them the land. You knew that they would not help Kerensky long. You had a magic charm, "The Land to the Peasants," by means of which you would win them in the course of a few months to the side of the proletariat. We, on the other hand, are certain that for some time to come the poor peasants, all over Western Europe, will side with Capitalism.

You will possibly say that, although in Germany there is no great mass of poor peasants whose assistance can be relied on, the millions of proletarians that side as yet with the bourgeoisie are sure to come round. That, therefore, the place of the poor peasants in Russia will here be taken by the proletarians, so that there is help all the same. This representation is also fundamentally wrong, and the immense difference remains.

The Russian peasants joined the proletariat AFTER Capitalism has been defeated; but when the German workers that are now as yet on the side of Capitalism join the ranks of the Communists, the struggle against Capitalism will begin in real earnest.

The revolution in Russia was terrible for the proletariat in the long years of its development and it is terrible now, after the victory. But at the actual time of revolution it was easy, and this was due to the peasants.

With us it is quite the contrary. In its development the revolution was easy, and it will be easy afterwards; but its actual coming will be terrible – more terrible, perhaps, than any other revolution ever was, for Capitalism, which in your country was weak and only slightly rooted as it were to feudalism, the middle ages and even barbarism, here in our country is strong and widely organised and deeply rooted, and the lower middle classes as well as the peasants, who always side with the strongest, with the exception of a shallow and economically unimportant layer, will stand with Capitalism until the very end.

The revolution in Russia was victorious with the help of the poor peasants. This should always be borne in mind here in Western Europe and all the world over. But the workers in Western Europe stand alone: this should never be forgotten in Russia.

### **The proletariat in Western Europe stands alone.**

This is the absolute truth: and on this truth our tactics must be based. All tactics that are not based on this are false, and lead the proletariat to terrible defeat.

Practice also has proved that these assertions are true, for the poor peasants in Western Europe have not only no programme and failed to claim the land, but they do not even stir now that Communism is approaching. As I have observed before, this statement is not to be taken absolutely literally. There are regions in Western Europe where, as we have mentioned before, landed property on a large scale is predominant, and where the peasants are therefore in favour of Communism. There are yet other regions where the local conditions are such that the poor peasants may be won for Communism. But these regions are comparatively small. Neither do I wish to imply that quite at the close of the revolution, when all things are coming down, there will be no poor peasants doming to our side. They undoubtedly will. That is why we must carry on an unceasing propaganda amongst them. Our tactics, however, must be adopted for the beginning and for the course of the revolution. What I mean is the general trend, the general tendency of conditions. And it is on these alone that our tactics must be based.<sup>[5]</sup>

From this there follows in the first place – and it should be clearly, emphatically and plainly stated – that in Western Europe the real revolution, that is to say the overthrow of Capitalism, and the erection and permanent institution of Communism, for the time being is possible only in those countries where the proletariat BY ITSELF is strong enough against all the other classes – in Germany, England, and Italy, where the help of the poor peasants is not possible. In the other countries the revolution can only be prepared as yet by means of propaganda, organisation and fighting. The revolution itself can only follow when the economic conditions will be thus much shaken through the revolution in the big States (Russia, Germany, and England), that the bourgeois class will have grown sufficiently weak. For you will agree with me that we cannot base our tactics on events that may come, but that may also never happen (help from the Russian armies, risings in India, terrible crises, etc., etc.).

That you should have failed to recognise this truth concerning the importance of the poor peasants, Comrade, is your first great mistake, and likewise that of the Executive in Moscow and of the International Congress.

What does it mean with regard to tactics, this fact that the proletariat of Western Europe stands all alone: that it has no prospect of any help whatsoever from any other class?

It means, in the first place, that the demands made on the masses are far greater here than in Russia – that, therefore, the proletarian mass is of far greater importance in the revolution. And in the second place that the importance of the leaders is proportionately smaller.

For the Russian masses, the proletarians, knew for certain, and already saw during the war, and in part before their very eyes, that the peasants would soon be on their side. The German proletarians, to take them first, know that they will be opposed by German Capitalism in its entirety, with all its classes.

It is true that already before the war the German proletarians numbered from nineteen to twenty million actual workers, of a population of seventy million, but they stood alone against all the other classes.<sup>[6]</sup> They are opposed by a Capitalism that is immeasurably stronger than that of Russia – and they are UNARMED. The Russians were armed.

From every German proletarian therefore, from every individual, the revolution demands a far greater courage and spirit of sacrifice than was necessary in Russia.

This is the outcome of the economic class relations in Germany, and not of some theory or idea risen from the brain of revolutionary romantics or intellectuals!

Unless the entire class or at least the great majority stand up for the revolution personally, with almost superhuman force, in opposition to all the other classes, the revolution will fail; for you will agree with me again that on determining our tactics we should reckon with our own forces, not with those from outside – on Russian help, for instance.

The proletariat almost unarmed, alone, without help, against a closely united Capitalism, means for Germany that every proletarian must be a conscious fighter, every proletarian a hero;



and it is the same for all Western Europe.

For the majority of the proletariat to turn into conscious, steadfast fighters, into real Communists, they must be greater, immeasurably greater, here than in Russia, in an absolute as well as a relative sense. And once more: this is the outcome, not of the representations, the dreams of some intellectual, or poet, but of the purest realities.

And as the importance of the class grows, the importance of the leaders becomes relatively less. This does not mean that we must not have the very best of leaders. The best are not good enough; we are trying hard to find them. It only means that the importance of the leaders, as compared to that of the masses, is decreasing.

For you, who had to win a country of 160 million, with the help of seven or eight million, the importance of the leaders was certainly immense! To triumph over so many, with so few, is in the first place a matter of tactics. To do as you did, Comrade, to win such a huge land, with such small forces, but with assistance from outside, all depends in the first place on the tactics of the leader. When you, Comrade Lenin, started the struggle with a small gathering of proletarians, it was in the first place your tactics that in the crucial moments waged the battles and won the poor peasants.

But what about Germany? There the cleverest of tactics, the greatest clarity, even the genius of leaders, cannot attain much. There you have an inexorable class enmity, one against all the others. There the proletarian class must tip the scales for itself – through its power, its numbers. Its power, however, is based above all on its quality, the enemy being so mighty and so endlessly better organised and armed than the proletariat.

You opposed the Russian possessing classes, as David opposed Goliath. David was little, but he had a deadly weapon. The German, the English, the West-European proletariat oppose Capitalism as one giant does another. Between them all depends on strength – strength of body, and above all of mind.

Have you not observed, Comrade Lenin, that in Germany there are no great leaders? They are all quite ordinary men. This points to the fact that this revolution must in the first place be the work of the masses, not of the leaders.

To my idea this is something more wonderful and grand than has ever been, and it is an indication of what Communism will be.

And as it is in Germany, it is in all Western Europe, for everywhere the proletariat stands alone.

The revolution of the masses, of the workers – of the masses of workers alone, for the first time in the world.

And not because thus it is good, or beautiful, or conceived in someone's brain, but because the economic and class relations will it.<sup>[7]</sup>



In other words, and to read the matter as clearly as possible: the relation between the West-European and the Russian revolution can be demonstrated by means of the following comparison:

Supposing that in an Asiatic country like China or British India, where only one half a per cent of the inhabitants are industrial proletarians, and 80 per cent small peasants, a revolution should break out, and should be successfully carried through by those small peasants under the lead of the politically and socially more trained proletarians that were united in local trade unions and co-operatives. If these Chinese or Indian workers proclaimed to them:

“We have won through our local trade unions and co-operatives, and now you must do the same with regard to your revolution,” what would the Russian workers have replied? They would have said:

“Dear friends, this is impossible. Our country is far more developed than yours. With us not half, but three per cent of the population are industrial proletarians. Our Capitalism is more powerful than yours, therefore we need better and more powerful organisations than you did.”

From this difference between Russia and Western Europe there follows likewise:

1. That when you, or the Executive in Moscow, or the opportunist Communists of Western Europe, of the Spartakus League, or of the English Communist Party, say: “It is nonsense to fight about the question of leader or masses,” that you in that case are wrong as regards us, not only because we are yet trying to find those leaders, but also because for you this question has quite another meaning.
2. That when you say to us: “Leader and mass must be one inseparable whole,” you are wrong, not only because we are striving for that unity, but also because that question has another meaning for you than for us.
3. That when you say: “In the Communist Party there should reign iron discipline, and absolute military centralisation,” this is wrong, not only because we are seeking iron discipline and strong centralisation, but also because this question has a different meaning for us and for you.
4. That when you say: “We acted in such and such a way in Russia (after the Kornilov offensive for instance, or some other episode), or entered Parliament during this or that period, or we remained in the trade unions, and therefore the German proletariat must do the same,” all this means absolutely nothing, and need not or cannot be applicable in any way. For the West-European class relations in the struggle, in the revolution, are quite different from those of Russia.
5. That when you wish to force upon us tactics that were good in Russia – tactics, for instance, that were based, consciously or unconsciously, on the conviction that here the poor peasants will soon join the proletariat – in other words, that the proletariat does not stand alone – that your tactics, which you prescribe, and which are followed here, will lead the West-European proletariat into ruin, and the most terrible defeat.

6. That when you, or the Executive in Moscow, or the opportunist elements in Western Europe, like the Central Board of the Spartakus League or the BSP, try to compel us to follow opportunist tactics (opportunism always seeks the support of outside elements, that forsake the proletariat), you are wrong.

The general bases on which the tactics in Western Europe must be founded are these: the recognition that the proletariat stands alone, that it is to expect no help, that the importance of the mass is greater, and that of the leaders relatively smaller.

This was not seen by Radek when he was in Germany, not by the Executive in Moscow, nor by you, as is evident from your words.

And it is on these bases that the tactics of the Kommunistische-Arbeiter Partei in Germany, the Communist Party of Sylvia Pankhurst,<sup>[8]</sup> and the majority of the Amsterdam Commission, as appointed by Moscow, are founded.

It is on these grounds that they strive, above all, to raise the masses as a whole, and the individuals to a higher level, to educate them one by one to be revolutionary fighters, by making them realise (not through theory only, but especially by practice), that all depends on them, that they are to expect nothing from foreign help, very little from leaders, and all from themselves.

Theoretically, therefore, and apart from private utterances, minor questions and excrescences, which like those of Wolffheim and Laufenberg, are inevitable in the first phases of a movement, the view taken by these parties and comrades is quite right, and your opposition absolutely wrong.<sup>[9]</sup>

On going from the East to the West of Europe, we traverse at a given moment an economic boundary. It runs from the Baltic to the Mediterranean, somewhere from Danzig to Venice. This line divides two worlds. West of this line there is a practically absolute domination of industrial, commercial and financial capital, united in the most highly developed banking capital.

Even agricultural capital is subject to, or has been compelled to unite with, this capital. This capital is organised to the utmost degree, and converges in the most firmly established State Governments of the world.

East of the line there is neither this gigantic development of industrial, commercial, transport and banking capital, nor its almost absolute domination, nor, consequently, the firmly established modern State.

It would be marvellous, indeed, if the tactics of the revolutionary proletariat west of this boundary-line were the same as in the east!

## **II. The Question of the Trade Unions**

Having brought forward the general theoretical bases, I will now proceed to prove, also by practice, that the Left Wing in Germany and England is right in general principles – on the questions of the Trade Unions and of parliamentarism.

First we will take the question of the Trade Unions.

“As parliamentarism embodies the spiritual, thus the Trade Union movement embodies the material power of the leaders over the masses of the workers. Under capitalism the Trade Unions constitute the natural organisations for uniting the proletariat, and as such Marx, already from the very beginning, has demonstrated their importance. Under a more developed capitalism, and to a greater extent even in the age of imperialism, the Trade Unions have ever more become gigantic unions, with a trend of development, equal to that of the bourgeois State bodies themselves. They have produced a class of officials, a bureaucracy, that controls all the engines of power of the organisation, the finances, the press, the appointment of lower officials; often it is invested with even greater power, so that from a servant of the rank and file, it has become the master, identifying itself with the organisation. The Trade Unions can be compared to the State and its bureaucracy, also in this: that, notwithstanding the democracy that is supposed to reign there, the members are unable to enforce their will against the bureaucracy; every revolt is broken against the cleverly constructed apparatus of official ordinances and statutes, before it has been able even to shake the highest regions.

“Only the most tenacious perseverance over several years can obtain even a moderate result, which mostly remains restricted to a change of persons. In the last few years, before and after the war, in England, Germany, and America, this often gave rise to rebellions of the members, who started strikes on their own account, against the will of the leaders, or the decrees of the union itself. That this should seem natural, and be accepted as such, is an indication in itself that the organisation does not represent the totality of the members, but something altogether foreign to them; and the workers do not control their union, but that the union is placed over them as an outside power against which they can rebel – a power which, all the same, has its origin in themselves: again, therefore, an analogy with the State. Once the revolt is over, the old domination begins again. In spite of the hatred and impotent exasperation of the masses, this domination manages to maintain itself, owing to the indifference and lack of clear insight, and of a united, indomitable will in the masses, and upheld as it is by the inner need for the Trade Unions, the only means the workers have to gain strength through unity, in their struggle against capital.”

### **Waning of TU Influence**

“Fighting against capital, in a constant opposition against its tendency of increasing misery, and enabling the working class, through the restriction of these tendencies, to keep the existence the Trade Union movement, has played its part under capitalism, and has thus become itself a member of capitalist society. It is only at the beginning of the

revolution, when the proletariat, from a member of capitalist society, is turned into the annihilator of this society, that the Trade Union finds itself in opposition to the proletariat.

“That which Marx and Lenin demonstrated for the State: that its organisation, in spite of formal democracy, makes it impossible to turn it into an Instrument of the proletarian revolution, must also hold good therefore for the Trade Union organisations. Their counter-revolutionary power cannot be destroyed or weakened through a change of staff, through the replacing of reactionary leaders by radical or revolutionary elements.

“It is the form of organisation that renders the masses as good as powerless, and prevents them from turning the Trade Unions into the organs of their will. The revolution can triumph only if it completely destroys this organisation: that is to say, if it alters the form of organisation so fundamentally as to turn it into something altogether different. The Soviet system, the construction from within, is not only able to uproot and abolish the State, but also the Trade Union bureaucracy: it will constitute not only the new political organs of the proletariat as opposed to capitalism, but likewise the foundation for the new Trade Unions. In the party factions in Germany, the idea of a form of organisation being revolutionary has been mocked at, because it is only the revolutionary sentiment, the revolutionary mind of the members, that matters. However, if the most important part of the revolution consists in the masses conducting their own concerns – the control of society and production – then every form of organisation that does not allow the masses to rule and to guide for themselves, must needs be counter-revolutionary and harmful, and as such it must be replaced by another form, which is revolutionary in so far as it allows the workers to decide matters for themselves.

“Through their very nature the Trade Unions are useless arms for the West-European revolution! Apart from the fact that they have become tools of capitalism, and that they are in the hands of traitors, apart from the fact that through their nature they are bound to make slaves of the members, no matter what the leaders may be, they are also unfit for use generally.” ([Pannekoek 1920](#))

### **The Harder Task of Europe.**

The Trade Unions are too weak in the contest against the most highly-organised capital in Western-European States. These latter are powerful: the unions are not. To a great extent the Trade Unions are Professional Unions as yet, which cannot make a revolution, if it were for that fact alone. And in so far as they are industrial unions, they are not founded on the factories, on the workshops themselves, and are consequently weak. Also they are more unions for mutual aid than for struggle, dating as they do from the days of the small bourgeoisie. Even before the revolution, their organisation was already inadequate for the struggle; for the Revolution itself it cannot serve at all – in Western Europe. For the factories, the workers in the factories, make the revolution, not in the industries and professions, but in the workshops. Moreover, these unions are far too slow-working, complicated instruments, good only for the evolutionary period. Even if

the revolution should not succeed right away, and we had once more to revert to peaceful action for a while, the Trade Unions would have to be destroyed and replaced by industrial unions, on a basis of industrial or workshop organisation. And with these miserable Trade Unions, that must be done away with in any case, they want to make the revolution! The workers in Western Europe need WEAPONS for the revolution. The only weapons for the revolution in Western Europe are *Industrial Organisations*. And these united into ONE big whole!

The workers in Western Europe need the very best weapons. They stand alone: they have no help. And therefore they need these industrial organisations. In Germany and England they need them at once, because there the revolution is nearest at hand. The other countries must have them as soon as possible, as soon as we can build them.

It is no good at all, Comrade Lenin, your saying: in Russia we did it in such and such a way, for in the first place you had no organisations that were so inadequate for the struggle as many of the Trade Unions are here. You had industrial unions. Secondly, your workers were more revolutionary in spirit. Thirdly, the organisation of the capitalists was weak: and the State also. And in the fourth place, and this is the main point: you had help. You did not need the very best of weapons. We stand alone, we must have them. We will not win unless we have them. We will be defeated over and over again, unless we have them.

Other grounds than material ones also demonstrate this.

Recall in your mind, Comrade, how things were in Germany, before and during the war. The Trade Unions, the far too weak but only means, were entirely in the hands of the leaders, who used them as dead machines on behalf of capitalism. Then the revolution broke out. The Trade Unions were used by the leaders and the masses of members as a weapon against the revolution. It was through their help, through their cooperation, through their leaders, nay, partly even through their members that the revolution was murdered. The Communists saw their own brothers being shot with the cooperation of the Trade Unions. Strikes in favour of the revolution were prevented, rendered impossible. Do you hold it possible, Comrade, that under such conditions revolutionary workers should remain in these unions? Especially when these latter are utterly inadequate instruments for the revolution! In my opinion this is a physical impossibility. What would you yourself have done, as a member of a political party, that of the Mensheviks for instance, if these had acted thus in the revolution? You would have split the Party (if you had not already done so)! You will reply:

this was a political party, it is different in the case of a Trade Union. I believe you are mistaken. In the revolution, during the revolution, every Trade Union, every workers' union even, is a political party – either pro- or counterrevolutionary.

In your article, however, you say, and you will do so now: these emotional impulses must be conquered, for the sake of unity and Communist propaganda. I will show you, by means of concrete examples, that during the revolution this was impossible in Germany. For these questions must also be considered quite concretely. Let us suppose that Germany had 100,000 really revolutionary dock labourers, 100,000 revolutionary metal workers, and 100,000 revolutionary miners; that these were willing to strike, to fight, to die for the revolution, and that

the other millions were not. What are these 300,000 to do? They must in the first place unite, and form a fighting league. This you acknowledge. Without organisation workers can do nothing. Now a new league against old unions, even if the workers remain in the old ones, is a split already; if not formally, at any rate actually, in reality. Next, however, the members of the new league need a press, meetings, localities, a salaried staff. This requires heaps of money. And the German workers possess next to nothing. In order to keep the new league going, they must needs, whether they like it or not, leave the old one. Thus we see that, concretely considered, that which you, Comrade, propose, is impossible.

### **Build on New Foundations.**

However, there are better material grounds yet. The German workers who left the Trade Unions, that wished to destroy them, that created the industrial organisations and workers' unions, stood IN THE REVOLUTION. It was necessary to fight at ONCE. The revolution was there. The Trade Unions refused to fight. What is the good then of saying: remain in the Trade Unions, propagate your ideas, you will grow stronger, and become the majority. Apart from the fact that the minority would be strangled, as is the custom there, this would be quite fine, and also the Left Wing would try it, if there were only time to do so. But it was impossible to wait. The revolution had begun. And it is still going on!

IN THE REVOLUTION (mind, Comrade, it was in the revolution that the German workers split the Party, and created their Workers' Union) the revolutionary workers will always separate themselves from the social-patriots. In the struggle, no other way is possible. No matter what you, and the Moscow Executive, and the International Congress say, and no matter how much you dislike a split in the Party, it will always take place, on psychological and material grounds, because the workers cannot in the long run tolerate the Trade Unions shooting them, and because there has to be fighting.

That is why the Left Wing has created the Workers' Unions; and as they believe that the revolution in Germany is not over yet, but it will proceed to the final victory, they keep them up.

Comrade Lenin, is there another way out, in the workers' movement, when two trends come up, but that of fighting? And when those trends are very divergent, if they oppose one another, is there another way out but secession? Did you ever hear of any other? And is there anything more opposed than revolution and counter-revolution?

For this reason again the KAPD and the General Workers' Unions are quite right.

And, Comrade, have not these secessions, these clearances always been a blessing for the proletariat? Does not this always become evident after a while? I have some experience in this matter. When we as yet belonged to the social-patriotic party we had no influence – after our expulsion we had some – in the beginning, and very soon we won a great, a very great influence. And how about you, the Bolsheviks, after the secession? I believe you fared quite well. Small influence at first, very much later on. And all now. It all depends on the economic and political development, whether a group, be it ever so small, does become the most powerful party. If the

revolution in Germany lasts, there is a fair hope that the importance and the influence of the workers' unions will surpass all the others. You should not be intimidated by their numbers – 70,000 against seven millions. Smaller groups than these have become the strongest – the Bolsheviks, among others!

The industrial unions and workshop organisations, and the Workers' Unions that are based on them and formed from them, why are they such excellent weapons for the revolution in Western Europe, the best weapons even together with the Communist Party? Because the workers act for themselves, infinitely more so than they did in the old Trade Unions, because now they control their leaders, and thereby the entire leadership, and because they have the supervision of the industrial organisation, and thereby of the entire union.

Every trade, every workshop is one whole, where the workers elect their representatives. The industrial organisations have been divided according to economic districts. Representatives have been appointed for the districts. And the districts in turn elect the general board for the entire State.

All the industrial organisations together, no matter to what trade they belong, constitute the one Workers' Union.

This, as we see, is an organisation altogether directed towards the revolution.

If an interval of comparatively peaceful fighting should follow, this organisation might moreover be easily adapted. The industrial organisations would only have to be combined, according to the industries, within the compass of the Workers' Unions.

### **The Worker has Power.**

It is obvious. Here the workers, every worker, has power, for in his workshop he elects his own delegates, and through them he has direct control over the district and State bodies. There is strong centralisation, but not too strong. The individual and the industrial organisation has great power. He can dismiss or replace his delegates at any time, and compel them to replace the higher positions at the shortest notice. This is individualism, but not too much of it. For the central corporations, the districts and government councils have great power. The individual and the central board have just that amount of power, which this present period, in which the revolution breaks out, requires and allows.

Marx writes that under capitalism the citizen is an abstraction, a cipher, as compared to the State. It is the same in the Trade Unions. The bureaucracy, the entire system of the organisation plane ever so far above, and are altogether out of the reach of the worker. He cannot reach them. He is a cipher as compared to them, an abstraction. For them he is not even the man in the workshop. He is not a living, willing, struggling being. If in the old Trade Unions you replace the bureaucracy by other persons, you will see that before long these also have the same character; that they stand high, unattainably high above the masses, and are in no way in touch with them.



Ninety-nine out of every hundred will be tyrants, and will stand on the side of the bourgeoisie. It is the very nature of the organisation that makes them so.

Your tactics strive to leave the Trade Unions as they are, “down below,” and only to give them other leaders somewhat more of the Left trend, is therefore purely a change “up above.” And the Trade Unions remain in *the power of leaders*. And these, once spoilt, everything is as of old, or at the very best, a slight improvement in the layers up above. No, not even if you yourself, or we ourselves, were the leaders, we would not consent to this. For we wish to enable the masses themselves to become more intelligent, more courageous, self-acting, more elevated in all things. We want the masses themselves to make the revolution. For only thus the revolution can triumph here in Western Europe. And to this end the old Trade Unions must be destroyed.

### **Industrial Workers Decide.**

How utterly different it is in the industrial unions. Here it is the worker himself who decides about tactics, trend, and struggle, and who intervenes if the “leaders” do not act as he wants them to. The factory, the workshop, being at the same time the organisation, he stands continually in the fight himself.

In so far as it is possible under capitalism, he is the maker and the guide of his own fate, and as this is the case with every one of them, **THE MASS IS THE MAKER AND LEADER OF ITS OWN FIGHT.**

More, infinitely more so, than was ever possible in the old Trade Unions, reformist as well as syndicalist.<sup>[10]</sup>

The industrial unions and workers’ unions that make the individuals themselves, and consequently the masses themselves, the direct fighters, those that really wage the war, are for that very reason the best weapons for the revolution, the weapons we need here in Western Europe, if ever we shall be able without help to overthrow the most powerful capitalism of the world.

But, Comrade, these are only the weaker grounds yet, as compared to the last, main actual reason, which hangs closely together with the principles I have indicated at the beginning. And it is this last ground which is decisive for the KAPD and the opposition party in England. These parties strive greatly to raise the spiritual level of the masses and individuals in Germany and England.

They are of the opinion that there is only ONE means to that end. And I should like to know whether you know of another means in the Labour movement? It is the formation of a group! That shows, in the struggle, what the mass should be. That shows, fighting, what the mass **MUST** be. If you know of another means, Comrade, tell me so. I know none other.

In the Labour movement, and especially, I imagine, in the revolution, there is but one way to prove the example – the example itself, the **DEED**.

The comrades of the Left Wing believe that this small group, in its fight against the Trade Unions and against Capitalism, will win the Trade Unions to its side, or, which is also possible, that gradually the Trade Unions will be directed towards a better course.

This can be attained only through the example. For the raising of the German worker to a higher level, therefore, these new organisations are absolutely indispensable.

The new formation, the Workers' Union, must act against the Trade Unions, in exactly the same way as the Communist parties act against the Socialist parties.<sup>[11]</sup>

The servile, reformist, social-patriotic masses can be converted only through example.

Next I come to England: to the English Left Wing.

After Germany, England is nearest to a revolution, not because in that country the situation is revolutionary already, but because the proletariat there is so numerous, and the capitalist and economic conditions most favourable. Only a strong blow is needed there and the fight will begin, a fight which can only end in a victory. And the blow will come. This is felt, this is almost instinctively known by the most advanced workers of England (as we all feel it), and because they feel this, they have founded a new movement, which, whilst manifesting itself in various directions, and searching as yet, just as in Germany – is in general the rank and file movement, the movement of the masses themselves, without, or practically without leaders.<sup>[12]</sup>

Their movement is very much like the German Workers' Union and its industrial organisations.

Did you observe, Comrade, that this movement has arisen in two of the most advanced countries only? And from the ranks of the workers themselves? And in many places.<sup>[13]</sup> This proves already in itself that it is of natural growth, and not to be stopped!

### **Struggle in England Essential.**

And in England this movement, this struggle against the Trade Unions, is needed more almost than in Germany, for the English Trade Unions are not only a tool in the hands of the leaders, for the maintenance of capitalism, but they are at the same time far more inefficient as a means for the revolution than those of Germany. The way they are conducted dates from the time of the small struggle, often as far back as the 19th or even the 18th century. England not only has industries where 25 Trade Unions exist, but most of the unions fight one another to the death for members!! And the members are utterly without power. Do you also wish to retain these Trade Unions, Comrade Lenin?

Must not these be opposed, split up, and destroyed? If you are against the Workers' Unions you must also be against the Shop Committees, the Shop Stewards, and the Industrial Unions. Whoever is in favour of the latter, is also in favour of the former. For the Communists in either aim at the same things.

The English Communists of the Left Wing wish to use this new trend in the Trade Union movement to destroy the English Trade Unions in their present shape, to alter them, to replace them by new instruments in the class struggle, which can be applied for the revolution. The same reasons that we have brought forward for the German movement holds good here.

In the postscript of the Executive Committee of the Third International to the KAPD, I have read that the EC is in favour of the IWW in America, as long as this latter wishes only political action and affiliation to the Communist Parties. And these IWW need not join the American Trade Unions! But the Executive Committee is against the Workers' Union in Germany; this latter must join the Trade Unions, although it is communist, and works in cooperation with the political party.

And you, Comrade Lenin, are in favour of the rank and file movement in England (although this often causes a split, and although many of its members want the destruction of the Trade Unions!) and against the Workers' Unions in Germany.

### **Executive Committee's Opportunism.**

I can explain your attitude and that of the Executive Committee only by opportunism; and a mistaken opportunism to boot.

It goes without saying that the Left Wing of the Communists in England cannot go as far as in Germany, because in England the revolution has not begun yet. It cannot as yet organise the rank and file movement all over the country into one whole for the revolution. But the English Left Wing is preparing this. And as soon as the revolution comes, the great masses of workers will leave the old Trade Unions as unserviceable for the revolution, and will join the industrial organisations.

And as the Left Communist Wing penetrates everywhere into this movement, seeking to spread the Communist ideas, it raises the workers by means of its example on to a higher level, also there, and already now. And, as in Germany, that is its real aim.<sup>[14]</sup>

The General Workers' Unions, and the rank and file movement, which are both founded on the factories, the workshops, and on these alone, are the forerunners of the Workers' Councils, the Soviets. As the revolution in Western Europe will be very difficult and consequently of probably very long duration, there will be a long period of transition, in which the Trade Unions are no longer any good, and in which there are no Soviets as yet. This period of transition will be filled out with the struggle against the Trade Unions, their re-forming, their replacing by better organisations. You need not fear, we will have ample time!

Once again this will be so, not because we of the Left Wing will it so, but because the revolution must needs have these new organisations. The revolution cannot triumph without them.

### **Hail the Rank and File Movement.**

All hail, therefore, the rank and file movement in England, and the Workers' Unions in Germany, first forerunners of the Soviets in Europe. Good luck to you, the first organisations that, with the Communist parties, will bring the revolution in Western Europe.

You, Comrade Lenin, wish to compel us to use bad weapons here in Western Europe, where we stand alone, without a single ally, against an as yet extremely powerful, extremely organised and armed capitalism, and where we stand in need of the very best of weapons, the very strongest. Where we want to organise the revolution on the shop floor, and on a shop floor basis, you wish to force the miserable Trade Unions on us. The revolution in Western Europe can and must be organised only on the shop floor and on a shop floor basis, because here capitalism has attained such a high economic and political organisation (in all directions) and because the workers (except for the Communist Party) have no other strong weapons. The Russians were armed, and had the poor peasants. What the weapons and the peasants were for the Russians, tactics and the organisation must be for us for the time being. And then YOU recommend the Trade Unions! From psychological, as well as from material grounds, in the midst of the revolution, we MUST fight these Trade Unions, and you try to hinder us in this fight. We can fight only by means of a splitting-up, and you are preventing us. We wish to form groups, that are to be an example, the only way of showing the proletariat what it is we seek, and you forbid this. We wish to raise the proletariat of Europe to a higher level, and you throw stones in our path.

You do not wish them then: the splitting up, the new formations, the higher stage of development!

And why not?

Because you want to have the big parties, and the big Trade Unions, in the Third International.

To us this looks like opportunism, opportunism of the very worst kind.<sup>[15]</sup>

Today, in the International, your actions differ widely from what they were in the Maximalist party. This was kept very "pure" (and is so to this day, perhaps). In the International, all elements are to be accepted right away, no matter how poorly communistic they are.

It is the curse of the Labour movement that, as soon as it has acquired a certain "power," it seeks to enlarge this power by unprincipled means. Social-Democracy also was originally "pure" in almost all countries. Most social-patriots of today were real Marxists. By Marxist propaganda the masses were won, and as soon as the party gained "power" they were abandoned.

Just as the Social-Democrats acted at that time, you and the Third International are acting now. Not on a national scale, of course, but internationally. The Russian Revolution has triumphed through "purity," through firmness of principle. Now it has gained power, and through it the international proletariat has obtained power, this power is to be extended over Europe, and immediately the old tactics are abandoned!

Instead of applying the same efficacious tactics in ALL the other countries to the inner strengthening of the Third International, opportunism is again resorted to, as before, in Social-

Democracy. All elements are now to be affiliated: the Trade Unions, the Independents, the French Centre, parts of the Labour Party. To preserve the semblance of Marxism, conditions are put that have to be SIGNED, and Kautsky, Hilferding, Thomas, etc., are expelled. The great mass, however, the medium quality, is admitted, is driven in by all possible means. And in order that the Centre shall be all the more powerful, the “Left Wing” is not admitted unless it joins that Centre! THE VERY BEST REVOLUTIONARIES, like the KAPD, are excluded!

And when these huge masses have thus been united on one average line, they proceed to one common advance under an iron discipline, and with leaders that have been tested in this most extraordinary manner. A common advance whither? Into the abyss.

### **Failure of Second International.**

What is the use of the finest principles, of the most splendid Theses of the Third International, if in practice we exercise this opportunism? The Second International also had the finest principles, yet it failed *through practice*.

We, however, the Left Wing, refuse to do so. In Western Europe we wish first to build very firm, very clear, and very strong (though at the outset perhaps quite small) parties, kernels, just as you did in Russia. And once we have those, we will make them bigger. But we always want them to be very firm, very strong, very “pure.” Only thus can we triumph in Western Europe. Therefore we absolutely reject your tactics, Comrade.

You say that we, the members of the Amsterdam Commission, have forgotten or have never known the lessons former revolutions have taught. Well, Comrade, there is one thing about these former revolutions which I remember quite well. It is this: that the extreme “Left” parties have always played a prominent, eminent part in all of them. It was such in the revolution of the Netherlands against Spain, in the English revolution, in that of France, in the Commune, and in the two Russian revolutions.

In accordance with the development of the Labour movement, there are two trends here in the West-European revolution: the radical and the opportunist trend. These can only arrive at sound tactics, at unity, by means of a mutual struggle. The radical trend, however, though in some particulars it may go too far, is much the best. And yet you, Comrade Lenin, go and support the opportunists!

And not only this! The Executive in Moscow, the RUSSIAN leaders of a revolution that triumphed only through the help of millions of poor peasants, forces these their tactics on the proletariat of Western Europe, which stands and has to stand all alone. And in so doing annihilates the best trend in Western Europe!

What incredible foolishness, and especially what dialectics:

When the revolution in Western Europe breaks out, it will work for you blue wonders! But the proletariat will be the victim.