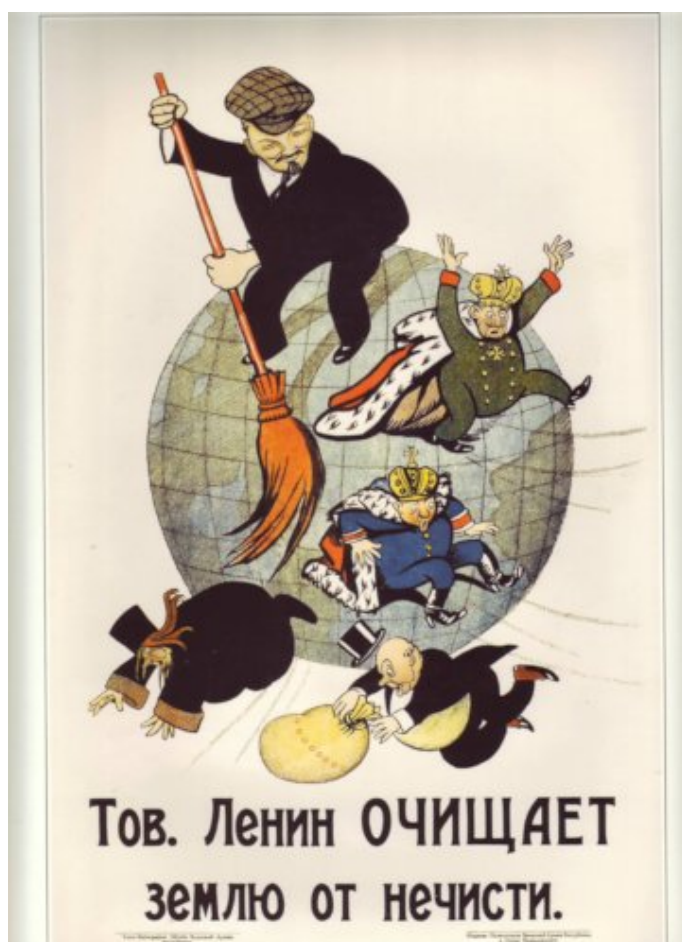


Lenin 150: What he can teach us about this historic moment

written by Melinda Butterfield
April 20, 2020



‘Comrade Lenin cleans the world of filth’
by Viktor Nikolayevich Deni (1920).

For a major anniversary like the 150th birthday of V.I. Lenin on April 22, 2020, it’s tempting to try and write some overarching summary of his enormous revolutionary contributions: building a revolutionary party, imperialism and national oppression, the state and revolution, the construction of a socialist society, and more.

But what is it that we most need from Lenin right now — amidst a global pandemic, rapid economic and climate collapse, fascist demonstrations encouraged by a sitting U.S. president, the precipitous end of the Bernie Sanders election campaign?

Today, the validity of Lenin’s revolutionary outlook is confirmed by the success of countries with revolutionary socialist foundations like Cuba, Vietnam and China in combating the coronavirus pandemic among their own populations, and sending internationalist medical support around the world. This, even after long decades of setbacks to the socialist camp and the world revolutionary process have forced these countries to take backward steps in order to survive.

This can’t help but open the eyes of many working-class and oppressed people to the alternative that Lenin’s revolutionary socialism represents to decaying world capitalism.

“The name of Lenin is a kind of synonym for revolutionary class struggle. The failure to agree on that is, in reality, a line of demarcation between communism and social democracy, with its various hues.” [So said Sam Marcy](#), an accomplished student of Lenin and the Russian Revolution, at an international communist conference in Belgium in 1994.

Marcy’s co-thinker and fellow organizer Vince Copeland (writing under the pen name David Grey) noted: “Lenin’s leadership, contrary to the theses of his enemies

and detractors, was not primarily in the force of his personality and the acquisition of 'power,' but in the educating of a party of revolutionaries with the understanding of the Russian and world revolution and in the nature of the struggle dictated by this understanding.

"While he had unusual talents and was much more intense about his objectives than most — if not all — of his contemporaries, everything about him was rational and understandable and therefore the revolutionaries of today have the possibility of learning just how he did it in his time as in a handbook, if not a blueprint, for doing it themselves in their time."

Rich and varied experience

Perhaps the most important thing Lenin has to teach us right now is that new social and economic conditions — including abrupt and dramatic changes like those we are living through — offer revolutionaries new challenges and new opportunities to advance the struggle for socialism.

In his book ["Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder,"](#) written in 1920 to help educate the international communist movement on the lessons of the Russian Revolution, Lenin described ["The Principal Stages in the History of Bolshevism"](#): the years of preparation for revolution (1903-1905), the years of revolution (1905-1907), the years of reaction (1907-1910), the years of revival (1910-1914), the First Imperialist World War (1914-1917), the second revolution in Russia (February to October 1917), and the third, triumphant socialist revolution (October to November 1917).

Each of these periods offered unique experiences and challenges to the revolutionaries and their party (the Bolsheviks, as the communists in Russia were known), from setting up a newspaper and participating in bourgeois elections to street protests and armed struggle. Each required different tactics and strategies to

educate and mobilize the workers and oppressed to fight for their own interests against the exploiting ruling class and its repressive state.

Without this rich and varied experience, Lenin explained, without these ups and downs in the struggle, filtered through an organized, disciplined, revolutionary party guided by a Marxist world outlook, the victory of the revolution in October-November 1917 and the construction of socialism in the Soviet Union would not have been possible.

Lenin continued: “The fundamental law of revolution, which has been confirmed by all revolutions and especially by all three Russian revolutions in the twentieth century, is as follows: for a revolution to take place it is not enough for the exploited and oppressed masses to realise the impossibility of living in the old way, and demand changes; for a revolution to take place it is essential that the exploiters should not be able to live and rule in the old way. It is only when the ‘lower classes’ do not want to live in the old way and the ‘upper classes’ cannot carry on in the old way that the revolution can triumph.

“This truth can be expressed in other words: revolution is impossible without a nationwide crisis (affecting both the exploited and the exploiters). It follows that, for a revolution to take place, it is essential, first, that a majority of the workers (or at least a majority of the class-conscious, thinking, and politically active workers) should fully realise that revolution is necessary, and that they should be prepared to die for it; second, that the ruling classes should be going through a governmental crisis, which draws even the most backward masses into politics (symptomatic of any genuine revolution is a rapid, tenfold and even hundredfold increase in the size of the working and oppressed masses — hitherto apathetic — who are capable of waging the political struggle), weakens the government, and makes it possible for the revolutionaries to rapidly overthrow it.”

The tasks ahead

It's obvious from the above that some of these revolutionary prerequisites already exist in the U.S. today, while the potential exists for the others to develop — perhaps very quickly.

There is an unprecedented [national and global capitalist crisis](#). It wasn't created by the coronavirus; but the pandemic acted as a catalyst, accelerating the inevitable collapse created by worldwide capitalist overproduction and exposing the hollowness of the U.S. economy in particular. As a result, workers in the U.S. and across the earth face a painful, prolonged period of misery and dislocation.

The governing bodies of the capitalist state are in crisis and conflict, while millions of workers who avoided politics in the past, especially youth, recently supported the reformist-socialist presidential campaign of Bernie Sanders, and are now expressing the feeling that things cannot go on in the old way.

Yet there is much work to be done in uniting existing revolutionary socialists and communists, scattered by the historic setbacks of the 1980s and 1990s and by old ideological disputes, and training a new generation of revolutionaries to take advantage of the opportunities that are rapidly developing.

At that 1994 communist gathering in Belgium, Sam Marcy said: "The need is for all revolutionary communists to unite on the basis of a common struggle against capitalist exploitation and imperialist oppression. It is not necessary for any grouping to abandon its propaganda in support of the views of individual leaders.

"What is needed is the broadest united front of revolutionary communist groupings, as long as they adhere to the spirit of revolutionary class struggle as generally promoted by Lenin in his [writings on admission to the Communist International](#)."

This task has perhaps never been more urgent than it is today.

