V. I. Lenin, “Our Programme,” 1899

Vladimir Ilich Ulyanov (1870–1924), is better known by his revolutionary name, Lenin. He was the leader of the Bolshevik faction in the Russian Revolution. Lenin believed that capitalism was an inherently imperialistic system, and in this document he lays out a separate political ethos and strategy, one that would be independent of capitalist ties. Because of his controversial writings, Lenin had spent much of his life outside of Russia. He criticized the provisional government that had taken over from the tsar in April 1917, and he called for a complete revolution, promising the people peace, land, and bread if they followed him. Lenin died in early 1924.

Source: Lenin Miscellany III, 1925.

International social democracy is at present going through a period of theoretical vacillations. Up to the present the doctrines of Marx and Engels were regarded as a firm foundation of revolutionary theory—nowadays voices are raised everywhere declaring these doctrines to be inadequate and antiquated. Anyone calling himself a social-democrat and having the intention to publish a social-democratic organ, must take up a definite attitude as regards this question, which by no means concerns German social-democrats alone.

We base our faith entirely on Marx’s theory; it was the first to transform socialism from a Utopia into a science, to give this science a firm foundation and to indicate the path which must be trodden in order further to develop this science and to elaborate it in all its details. It discovered the nature of present-day capitalist economy and explained the way in which the employment of workers—the purchase of labor power—the enslavement of millions of those possessing no property by a handful of capitalists, by
the owners of the land, the factories, the mines, etc., is concealed. It has shown how the whole development of modern capitalism is advancing towards the large producer ousting the small one, and is creating the prerequisites which make a socialist order of society possible and necessary. It has taught us to see, under the disguise of ossified habits, political intrigues, intricate laws, cunning theories, the class struggle, the struggle between, on the one hand, the various species of the possessing classes, and, on the other hand, the mass possessing no property, the proletariat, which leads all those who possess nothing. It has made clear what is the real task of a revolutionary socialist party—not to set up projects for the transformation of society, not to preach sermons to the capitalists and their admirers about improving the position of the workers, not the instigation of conspiracies, but the organization of the class struggle of the proletariat and the carrying on of this struggle, the final aim of which is the seizure of political power by the proletariat and the organization of a socialist society.

We now ask: What new elements have the touting “renovators” introduced into this theory, they who have attracted so much notice in our day and have grouped themselves round the German socialist Bernstein? Nothing, nothing at all; they have not advanced by a single step the science which Marx and Engels adjured us to develop; they have not taught the proletariat any new methods of fighting; they are only marching backwards in that they adopt the fragments of antiquated theories and are preaching to the proletariat not the theory of struggle but the theory of submissiveness—submissiveness to the bitterest enemies of the proletariat, to the governments and bourgeois parties who never tire of finding new methods of persecuting socialists. Plekhanov, one of the founders and leaders of Russian social-democracy, was perfectly right when he subjected
to merciless criticism the latest “Criticism” of Bernstein, whose views have now been rejected even by the representatives of the German workers at the Party Congress in Hanover.

We know that on account of these words we shall be drenched with a flood of accusations; they will cry out that we want to turn the Socialist Party into a holy order of the “orthodox,” who persecute the “heretics” for their aberrations from the “true dogma,” for any independent opinion, etc. We know all these nonsensical phrases which have become the fashion nowadays. Yet there is no shadow of truth in them, no iota of sense. There can be no strong socialist party without a revolutionary theory which unites all socialists, from which the socialist draw their whole conviction, which they apply in their methods of fighting and working. To defend a theory of this kind, of the truth of which one is completely convinced, against unfounded attacks and against attempts to debase it, does not mean being an enemy of criticism in general. We by no means regard the theory of Marx as perfect and inviolable; on the contrary, we are convinced that this theory has only laid the foundation stones of that science on which the socialists must continue to build in every direction, unless they wish to be left behind by life. We believe that it is particularly necessary for the Russian socialist to work out the Marxist theory independently, for this theory only gives general precepts, the details of which must be applied in England otherwise than in France, in France otherwise than in Germany, and in Germany otherwise than in Russia. For this reason we will willingly devote space in our paper to articles about theoretical questions, and we call upon all comrades openly to discuss the matters in dispute.

What are the main questions which arise in applying the common programme of
all social-democrats to Russia?

We have already said that the essence of this programme consists in the organisation of the class struggle of the proletariat and in carrying on this struggle, the final aim of which is the seizure of political power by the proletariat and the construction of a socialist society. The class struggle of the proletariat is divided into: the economic fight (the fight against individual capitalist, or against the individual groups of capitalists by the improvement of the position of the workers) and the political fight (the fight against the Government for the extension of the rights of the people, i.e., for democracy, and for the expansion of the political power of the proletariat). Some Russian social-democrats (among them apparently those who conduct the paper *Rabochaia Mysl*) regard the economic fight as incomparably more important and almost go so far as to postpone the political fight to a more or less distant future. This standpoint is quite wrong. All social-democrats are unanimous in believing that it is necessary to carry on an agitation among the workers on this basis, i.e., to help the workers in their daily fight against the employers, to direct their attention to all kinds and all cases of chicanery, and in this way to make clear to them the necessity of unity. To forget the political for the economic fight would, however, mean a digression from the most important principle of international social-democracy; it would mean forgetting what the whole history of the Labour movement has taught us. Fanatical adherents of the bourgeoisie and of the government which serves it, have indeed repeatedly tried to organise purely economic unions of workers and thus to deflect them from the “politics” of socialism. It is quite possible that the Russian Government will also be clever enough to do something of the kind, as it has always endeavored to throw some largesse or other sham presents to the people in order
to prevent them becoming conscious that they are oppressed and are without rights.

No economic fight can give the workers a permanent improvement of their situation, it cannot, indeed, be carried on a large scale unless the workers have the free right to call meetings, to join in unions, to have their own newspapers and to send their representatives to the National Assembly as do the workers in Germany and all European countries (with the exception of Turkey and Russia). In order, however, to obtain these rights, a political fight must be carried on. In Russia, not only the workers but all the citizens are deprived of political rights. Russia is an absolute monarchy. The Tsar alone promulgates laws, nominates officials and controls them. For this reason it seems as though in Russia the Tsar and the Tsarist Government were dependent on no class and cared for all equally. In reality, however, all the officials are chosen exclusively from the possessing class, and all are subject to the influence of the large capitalists who obtain whatever they want—the Ministers dance to the tune the large capitalists play. The Russian worker is bowed under a double yoke; he is robbed and plundered by the capitalists and the landowners, and, lest he should fight against them, he is bound hand and foot by the police, his mouth is gagged and any attempt to defend the rights of the people is followed by persecution. Any strike against a capitalist results in the military and police being let loose on the workers. Every economic fight of necessity turns into a political fight, and social-democracy must indissolubly combine the economic with the political fight into a united class struggle of the proletariat.

The first and chief aim of such a fight must be the conquest of political rights, the conquest of political freedom. Since the workers of St. Petersburg alone have succeeded, in spite of the inadequate support given them by the socialists, in obtaining concessions
from the Government within a short time—the passing of a law for shortening the hours
of work—the whole working class, led by a united “Russian Social-Democratic Labour
Party,” will be able, through obstinate fighting, to obtain incomparably more important
concessions.

The Russian working class will see its way to carrying on an economic and
political fight alone, even if no other class comes to its help. The workers are not alone,
however, in the political fight. The fact that the people is absolutely without rights and
the unbridled arbitrary rule of the officials rouses the indignation of all who have any
pretensions to honesty and educations, who cannot reconcile themselves with the
persecution of all free speech and all free thought; it rouses the indignation of the
persecuted Poles, Finns, Jews, Russian sects, it rouses the indignation of small traders, of
the industrialists, the peasants, of all who can nowhere find protection against the
chicanery of the officials and the police. All these groups of the population are incapable
of carrying on an obstinate political fight alone; if, however, the working class raises the
banner of a fight of this kind it will be supported on all sides. Russian social-democracy
will place itself at the head of all fights for the rights of the people, of all fights for
democracy, and then it will be invincible.

These are our fundamental ideas which we shall develop systematically and from
every point of view in our paper.

We are convinced that in this way we shall tread the path which has been
indicated by the “Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party” in its “Manifesto.”

QUESTIONS
1. Given Lenin’s theories, how would he react to an event like the Great War?

2. Is Lenin more of a theorist or a pragmatist, meaning does he call for action or new avenues of thought with respect to a workers’ revolution? What actions does he advocate?

3. According to Lenin, why is it important to have country-specific plans for revolution?