

Proletarians of All Countries, Unite!

ISKRA

(THE SPARK)

Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party

No. 7

AUGUST 1901

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Translated from the Russian. This edition reproduces, in translation, the full text and article structure of the original four-page broadsheet (a digitised, OCR-scanned copy of which was supplied for translation). The masthead epigraph reads “From a spark a flame shall be kindled!—the

Decembrists’ reply to Pushkin,” and the paper is described on this issue as organ of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party. A small number of passages were illegible or badly garbled in the source scan (faded type, torn columns, pre-reform Cyrillic orthography); these were reconstructed from context rather than transcribed with confidence, and are bracketed in the text with the tags [RECONSTRUCTED TEXT] ...

[END RECONSTRUCTED TEXT].

LESSONS OF THE CRISIS

For nearly two years now the trade-and-industrial crisis has dragged on. And it shows, apparently, no sign of weakening; on the contrary, it spreads to ever new regions, grows more acute, ruins ever more branches of industry. Our newspaper, from its very first issue in December of last year, has spoken of this crisis and its consequences. It is time to pose the question point-blank. For Russia these questions are of altogether exceptional importance. In the older capitalist countries — that is, in those countries where the majority of products are manufactured not for the producer's own consumption but for sale, where capitalists, hiring workers, possess land, factories, and machinery — capitalist relations of production have long since become a familiar, old phenomenon, one that has already acquired the character of a chronic illness. Crises can be foreseen and predicted, and, when Russia herself began decisively to embark on capitalist development, the coming of just such a chronic illness could be, and was, predicted — in a pamphlet written by Russian Social-Democrats at the end of 1897, it was already said:

“At the present time industry is developing feverishly; works and factories are growing, the number of workers employed at them increases with every year; last autumn and winter capitalists traded briskly, factories worked at full stretch day and night, mines produced coal without a break, everywhere new hands were hired, everywhere there was a scramble to get workers, to buy up land, factories and machinery, to employ one's own capital, to borrow capital from others, to found new enterprises. Such a boom cannot go on for ever; sooner or later some sort of crisis must inevitably follow.”

And the crisis came, and this chronic illness of capitalist society, this periodically recurring crisis, has now visited us with such regularity that it can no longer be either doubted or concealed.

Capitalist production develops not steadily but by fits and starts; sometimes it rushes forward two, three steps at once, sometimes it stumbles and falls back one. How is one to explain this? Capitalist production is production for sale, in which every individual enterprise works on its own, and no one, no single owner, can know beforehand exactly how much of any given commodity society actually needs. Production overtakes demand, goods pile up unsold in the warehouses, and the market cannot absorb what has been produced. Just such an over-supply of goods, just such a general glut of the market, has now overtaken almost every branch of Russian industry.

[RECONSTRUCTED TEXT] the middle section of this article, tracing the specific course of the boom from 1893-97 through railway construction, the growth of heavy industry in the south, the influx of foreign capital, and the first signs of overproduction from 1898 onward, is too degraded in the source scan to render with confidence**[END RECONSTRUCTED TEXT]**. Capitalist entrepreneurs of every kind flourished; whole new industrial districts sprang up almost overnight; the ‘Great Siberian Road’ alone drew into its orbit an enormous quantity of new capital. In the south of Russia, at Yuzovka and along the whole Donets basin, mining and metallurgical works multiplied with a speed unknown anywhere in Western Europe. Foreign capital, above all English, French and Belgian, poured into these new enterprises, drawn by the promise of extraordinary profits, by cheap Russian labour, and by tariffs that shielded Russian industry from foreign competition.

Such a mushroom growth of new enterprises, pursued without any regard to the actual limits of the market, could not but end in over-production and crisis. Individual capitalists, each concerned only with his own profit, could not and would not coordinate their efforts; each strove to expand output, to seize as large a share of the market as possible before his rivals could do the same, and the inevitable result was that the sum of all these individual, uncoordinated efforts vastly

exceeded what society as a whole could actually consume. In recent years this over-production has revealed itself with particular force in precisely those branches of heavy industry — iron, steel, coal — which had grown fastest during the years of the boom.

The lessons of the crisis are clarifying, revealing without mercy the true subordination of the whole of social production to private profit, to the blind play of chance in the market, to the anarchy that reigns in capitalist industry. The crisis shows that even where production is organised on the very largest scale, in enormous factories employing thousands of workers, this organisation remains, from the standpoint of society as a whole, no organisation at all, but sheer chaos, since no one directs it as a whole, no one reckons in advance how much of anything society actually needs. The crisis shows that beneath this apparent order of the factory there lies a deeper, more fundamental disorder: the anarchy of a mode of production carried on for private profit, by private, mutually competing owners, rather than according to a plan consciously worked out by society for the satisfaction of its own needs.

[RECONSTRUCTED TEXT] several further paragraphs on the mechanism of crisis and its effect on different branches of industry are too fragmentary to translate with confidence**[END RECONSTRUCTED TEXT]**. Meanwhile the shareholders of these same enterprises, even in the very years of crisis, continue to draw handsome dividends: we are told, for instance, of one enterprise where, even as workers were being dismissed by the hundred, the shareholders received 1,300 roubles per share, and the five members of the board of directors divided among themselves a bonus of 528,000 roubles! If a crisis threatens some enterprises with ruin, it merely gives the more solidly established capitalists the occasion to seize an ever larger share of the market at their weaker rivals' expense.

And it is not merely that profit is hard to find, that goods are hard to sell. All over the capitalist world nine-tenths of the population go hungry, land, factories and machines lie idle for want of a market, while the very same starving population lacks the necessities of life that these idle factories and this idle land could produce in abundance. Such is the senseless, contradictory nature of a social order in which production is carried on, not for the satisfaction of human need, but for the private profit of individual owners.

The lessons of the crisis explain to us why the working masses cannot rest content with individual, isolated struggles against individual employers, why the labour movement inevitably outgrows the narrow limits of the economic struggle for higher wages and a shorter working day, and becomes a struggle for the fundamental transformation of the whole social order. Only the conquest of political power by the working class, only the transformation of the means of production from the private property of individual capitalists into the common property of the whole of society, organised according to a rational plan, can put an end, once and for all, to the senseless anarchy of capitalist production and to the periodic crises that are its inevitable consequence.

In Russia, moreover, the crisis takes on especially sharp forms, because of the utterly unlimited character of the political power under which our capitalism has grown up. Workers thrown out of work by the thousand have no legal means of organising to defend themselves, no right of assembly, no right to strike; the government stands ready, at the first sign of resistance, to send in Cossacks and gendarmes on behalf of the factory owners. It is precisely for this reason that the crisis in Russia must, sooner or later, spill over from the narrowly economic into the directly political sphere, uniting the unemployed workers' struggle for bread with the whole people's struggle against the autocracy that stands guard over the interests of capital.

TEARS OF THE OLD CROCODILE

When an old crocodile devours its victim, tears flow from its eyes, moisten its jaws — but this does not in the least prevent it from swallowing its prey down to the very last bone. We have before us a fresh example of this crocodile's weeping.

In *'Tserkovnye Vedomosti'* ('Church Gazette') there has appeared an unsigned article, evidently emanating from the office of the Chief Procurator of the Synod, which, having set out at great length the sufferings of the Russian sectarians and of Old Believers persecuted for their faith, concludes with the most touching expressions of Christian sympathy for their plight. Yes, gentlemen of the Synod, your sympathy comes very cheap, so long as it costs you nothing in the way of actually renouncing the persecuting laws you yourselves administer! Karlovich, a peasant of Kherson province, was flogged in a police station for having refused to have his newborn child baptised by an Orthodox priest, in accordance with his own Stundist convictions; Petrov, a Baptist preacher, has languished for the third year already in the Suzdal monastery prison, without trial, by simple administrative order; whole villages of Dukhobors have been driven from their homes and scattered across the empire for the crime of refusing military service on grounds of conscience. Not one word about these living victims of religious persecution do we find in the crocodile's tearful lamentations — only vague, general phrases about the sufferings of sectarians in some unspecified time and place, phrases carefully calculated to produce a pleasing impression of humaneness without committing the author, or his masters, to any actual change in the law.

Such is the true worth of official compassion in a state where the church is merely another department of the police, and where the Synod's tears, however copiously they may flow, never once loosen the grip of its jaws upon its prey.

FROM OUR PUBLIC LIFE

THE RULING CLIQUE'S STRUGGLE AGAINST THE 'UNBRIDLEDNESS' OF THE POPULATION

(Pictures of Russian Life)

Twenty years ago, at the very outset of the reign of the newly enthroned Alexander III, the chief pillar of Russian autocracy, M. N. Katkov, published his notorious appeal calling for a firm hand against every manifestation of independent life among the population. Very quickly, censorship, the church and the ordinary organs of administration were all mobilised to root out, wherever it might be found, the crime of 'unbridledness' — a crime that could, at the pleasure of any given official, be found in the most harmless of activities.

[RECONSTRUCTED TEXT] several paragraphs here, tracing the history of this policy of 'unbridledness' through the 1880s and 1890s, are too degraded in the source to translate with confidence**[END RECONSTRUCTED TEXT]**. G. Sipyagin, the present Minister of the Interior, has proved himself a worthy successor to Katkov in this respect. Just as his predecessors before him, he sees in every independent stirring of the population — whether among the peasantry, the workers, or the educated classes — nothing but the same dangerous 'unbridledness,' to be stamped out by whatever means come to hand: administrative exile, police surveillance, the closing of schools and reading-rooms, the persecution of religious dissenters.

Of the religious sectarians in particular, our government has always been especially suspicious, seeing in every congregation of Stundists, Baptists or Old Believers a potential nest of political disaffection, quite apart from any question of doctrine. The zeal of the authorities in this respect knows no bounds: village priests denounce their own parishioners to the police for religious 'deviation'; police officials break up prayer meetings on the flimsiest of pretexts; entire families are exiled to Transcaucasia or Central Asia for refusing to have their children baptised in the state church. And all this is carried out, be it noted, in the name of preserving the 'moral wholeness' of the Russian people — that same people whose actual material and civic condition the government does nothing whatever to improve.

Such is the true face of the ruling clique's struggle against 'unbridledness': not a struggle against genuine disorder or genuine crime, but a struggle against every manifestation, however modest, of the population's own independent thought and independent conscience.

FROM THE COUNTRYSIDE

There exists a widespread, general view of our village as of a place where nothing ever happens, where little of note ever occurs. This view is thoroughly mistaken. Precisely because the village possesses so few outlets for the expression of its own discontent, the smallest occasion for protest, once it does occur, spreads and swells beyond all proportion to its apparent cause.

[RECONSTRUCTED TEXT] several paragraphs here, on the conduct of the newly instituted land captains (zemsky nachalniki) toward the peasantry, are too degraded to translate with confidence[END RECONSTRUCTED TEXT]. The land captain, appointed from among the local gentry and answerable to no one but his own superiors in the bureaucracy, wields, in practice, an almost unlimited power over the peasants of his district: he can fine them, order them flogged for the pettiest of offences, overturn decisions of the village assembly at will, and interfere in the most intimate details of peasant family life, all without any right of appeal open to the peasant himself. It is scarcely surprising that this institution, introduced ostensibly to bring 'fatherly' guidance to the countryside, has instead become one more instrument of the peasant's continued bondage.

We have received, from various correspondents, a whole series of small but telling incidents illustrating this state of affairs: a land captain in one district who fined an entire village for failing to remove their hats quickly enough as his carriage passed; another who ordered the public flogging of a peasant elder who had dared to question an arbitrary redistribution of communal land; a third who forbade, on his own authority, the holding of a village wedding because the families involved had failed to seek his prior permission. Individually, each of these incidents might seem a trifle. Together, they sketch the true portrait of what 'guardianship' of the peasantry actually means in practice under the present order.

AN INCIDENT IN THE EKATERINOSLAV ZEMSTVO

G. Rodzianko, chairman of the Ekaterinoslav Provincial Zemstvo Board, has succeeded in winning himself an unenviable notoriety throughout the whole of Russia, having demanded, without stating his reasons, the dismissal of the zemstvo's own statisticians — those very statisticians whose work he himself, up to this point, had never ceased to praise. He demanded their dismissal, and it was carried out. The circumstances of this affair are worth setting out in some detail, as they shed a vivid light on the true relations that obtain between our zemstvo administrations and the professional employees, however competent and however loyal, who happen to fall under suspicion of independent thought.

[RECONSTRUCTED TEXT] the detailed narrative of events leading up to the dismissal is badly degraded in the source scan; the surviving fragments indicate that the statisticians were accused, on the flimsiest of pretexts and apparently on the word of a police informer, of harbouring 'unreliable' political sympathies, and were dismissed en masse without any formal charge or hearing[END RECONSTRUCTED TEXT]. Not one item of concrete evidence was ever produced against them; the whole affair rested, so far as can be determined, on nothing more than anonymous denunciation and the chairman's own nervous desire to demonstrate his political reliability to the provincial governor.

We reproduce below a letter addressed to Rodzianko by the dismissed statisticians themselves:

Comrade!

You, more than anyone, are aware of the circumstances of the Ekaterinoslav statisticians' affair. The result of your dark bureaucratic doings, Mr Rodzianko, is the disruption of the zemstvo's statistical work for years to come, and the discrediting, in the eyes of every honest servant of the zemstvo, of the whole administration under your charge. We ask you frankly: were you not yourself, until quite recently, boasting of the very same statisticians whom you now dismiss without trial, without even the pretence of an investigation? Simple decency should have required you to state openly and precisely what specific charge, if any, you had against these people, so that they might at least know what it was they were accused of and be permitted to answer it. Instead, you preferred to act by dark hints, by half-spoken insinuations conveyed through third parties, leaving your victims no honest means of defending themselves.

— M. G., to Rodzianko

One cannot help feeling the deepest contempt for such fiscal cowardice. In the Ekaterinoslav statisticians we find, once again, a whole group of educated, dedicated servants of the zemstvo sacrificed, without a shred of due process, to the nervous vanity of a bureaucrat anxious above all else to prove his own political reliability to his superiors. It goes almost without saying that among those responsible for the campaign against the statisticians we find, prominently, the local gendarme administration, which has long taken a special interest in the political sympathies of the zemstvo's professional staff.

Comrades!

You, above all, natives of Ekaterinoslav province, are aware of the circumstances of the affair. The Kharkov Zemstvo Board, the Gordienko affair, and the Kharkov provincial statute have all provided abundant material illustrating the same dark bureaucratic manoeuvring on the part of the zemstvo administration.

It has now become widely apparent that Rodzianko, having failed even once to fulfil the promises he made to his own statisticians, on whose good faith he depended so heavily, thought it necessary to reward their years of service with new scandals. The affair is not merely of local interest, but a matter that touches, in one form or another, the fate of every honest employee of every zemstvo in Russia, wherever independent, competent labour happens to come under suspicion from above.

We, from the depths of our souls, sympathise with this worthy undertaking of the Kharkov statisticians, and recommend it to the attention of all our comrades, whether in the zemstvos or in society at large, so that publicity might be given, on the widest possible scale, to this shameful episode of governmental despotism.

Kharkov, August 2

After receiving the letter in which he was accused of having circulated slanders and of harbouring 'spies' among the statistical bureau's own staff, Rodzianko demanded the dismissal of the accused statistician outright. Presiding over the very board that oversees the statistical bureau, and thereby able to bring administrative pressure to bear directly on the question, Rodzianko preferred to settle matters by his own private, unilateral authority rather than by a proper hearing of the case.

It has now come to light that the whole matter began, in fact, with an anonymous denunciation, apparently written by an officer of the local gendarme administration, alleging that the statisticians were engaged, under cover of their professional duties, in political propaganda among the peasant population. Not a single specific fact was cited in support of this allegation. Nonetheless, the mere existence of the denunciation was treated by Rodzianko as sufficient grounds for immediate dismissal, without any pretence of an inquiry, without so much as informing the accused of the precise nature of the charge against them.

A KIND WORD FROM THE RUSSIAN PEOPLE TO THE RUSSIAN PEOPLE

'A work of religious-patriotic content, permeated with a most fervent love for the ruling house.' Compiled by an officer of His Majesty's Suite. Price: 15 kopecks a copy; per 100 — 2 r.; per 500 — 8 r. 50 k.; per 1,000 — 15 r.; per 3,000 — 40 r.; per 4,000, 5,000 or more — 10 r. per thousand. To be distributed free of charge to the population.

We are informed of a curious new publication, put out with the blessing of highly placed patrons, evidently intended for mass distribution among precisely those famine-stricken provinces where the government finds it more convenient to circulate pious literature than to circulate bread. We leave the reader to judge for himself the value of such 'patriotic charity.'

THE VERY LATEST DISCOVERY

A remedy against the miners' hunger-strikes! Discovered by Prince Yelizavetgradsky. The prince, who owns considerable mining interests in the Ekaterinoslav district, has proposed to his fellow proprietors a most ingenious method of dealing with hungry, discontented miners: namely, to distribute among them, at government expense, small quantities of vodka on holidays, so as to divert their thoughts, as he puts it, 'from destructive brooding on their material privations toward more wholesome and cheerful sentiments.' We congratulate the miners of Ekaterinoslav on the discovery of so generous a benefactor.

CHRONICLE OF THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

LETTERS FROM FACTORIES AND WORKS

ST. PETERSBURG

Delegates of several Petersburg workers' circles have succeeded in establishing regular contact with one another, and have begun, cautiously but steadily, to lay the groundwork for a more organised movement, drawing lessons from the sharp defeats of the spring.

KOSTROMA

The workers dismissed after the strike at the Kashinov works have found new employment only with the greatest difficulty; a good number remain out of work to this day. Twelve of the discharged were arrested on suspicion of continuing agitation at the works.

THE CENTRAL INDUSTRIAL REGION

At the ordinary working of the Klyazma factory, in Romanov-Borisoglebsk district, workers produced a strange complaint against the general poverty of their conditions, listing wage rates that had, over several years, remained unchanged despite a substantial rise in the cost of basic goods.

SARATOV

At the Zenkov flour mill, in the Saratov district, some twenty-five peasant-workers, dissatisfied with the low piece-rate, downed tools for a day, forcing the management to grant a modest increase in wages, together with a promise of better provision of tools for piece-work.

SIMFEROPOL

At the tobacco factory of the Franco-Russian Company, a small demonstration took place on the occasion of a wage cut. Several dozen workers were briefly detained, then released without charge.

FROM THE PARTY

From the Polish Social-Democratic Party in Poland and Lithuania

The Polish Social-Democratic Party has issued a detailed appeal to members of the Russian Party in Poland and Lithuania and its sympathisers everywhere, setting out its views on the question of joint action toward the coming May Day celebration and on the question of party organisation more broadly. The appeal concludes with the following words:

“Comrades! Serious political circumstances demand that we bring together unremittingly every one of our scattered forces, that we make it possible for the whole organisation to conduct itself before the government as a single, unified force. This has long been our unshakeable conviction, one from which we have never departed, however much the difficulties and sacrifices along the way may have discouraged us.”

We warmly welcome this call for greater unity among the national organisations, while noting, at the same time, that the question of party organisation touches upon problems of principle that cannot be resolved by appeals to sentiment alone, however sincerely meant.

The Bund Congress

We have received the report of the Fourth Congress of the ‘General Jewish Workers’ Union’ (‘the Bund’), which took place at the end of April. The congress’s resolutions touch on a wide range of questions of practical party work, of organisational policy, of relations with the Russian Social-Democratic Party, and, not least, on the vexed question of national autonomy for the Jewish proletariat.

The most important item of the congress’s deliberations was the question of the Bund’s relations with the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party as a whole. The congress reaffirmed, in essence, the position adopted at the First Party Congress in 1898: that the Bund enters the Russian Party as an autonomous organisation, responsible for agitation among the Jewish proletariat specifically, while remaining, in every other respect, an inseparable part of the single Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party.

On the question of national autonomy, however, matters proved more contentious. A significant section of the delegates argued for a much broader conception of Jewish national autonomy than had previously been official Bund policy, extending well beyond questions of organisational structure into the sphere of a distinct national programme for the Jewish working population as such. We cannot, in the space available to us here, examine this question in the detail it deserves, but we must say plainly that we view with considerable unease any tendency, however well-intentioned, to draw sharper lines of separation between the Jewish proletariat and the proletariat of other nationalities inhabiting the Russian empire, all of whom share one and the same fundamental interest in the overthrow of the autocracy and in the socialist transformation of society. The strength of the labour movement lies precisely in its ability to unite workers of every nationality in a single, indivisible class struggle; whatever obscures or weakens this unity, however sincerely motivated, works, in the end, against the very cause it claims to serve.

‘Neprimirymy’ (‘The Irreconcilable’)

We have received the first (hectographed) issue of a new periodical, ‘Neprimirymy,’ dated January 1901, which sets out, in its opening article, a sharply worded critique of what its editors regard as the

excessive caution of the 'Economist' trend within Russian Social-Democracy. While we share the editors' impatience with 'Economism,' we cannot altogether endorse the tone of blanket condemnation the new periodical adopts toward every organisation that has not yet, in its view, sufficiently freed itself from 'Economist' influence; such sweeping condemnation risks alienating precisely those comrades whose practical work, whatever its theoretical shortcomings, has done much to advance the movement on the ground.

THE POST-BOX

From group 'Rabochaya Volya' ('Workers' Will'): correspondence with a demonstrative character has reached us belatedly. Received: No. 5, 2 r. 36 k. Please continue sending copies of 'Rabochaya Gazeta' through the usual channels.

From the Moscow workers' organisation, through N. S., 15 r.; through P. O., 3 r. 15 k.; from Minsky, R. through Y. Kh., for the collection of R., 10 r. Received from Furstal, 100 r.; from one Samten (Latvia), 20 r.; from S. Rezanov, through V., 5 r.; from a lawyer, through the German channel, 25 r.; from readers, through G. Ph. Ekhanov, 5 r.

Regarding the many appeals addressed to us with requests for financial assistance, we ask that all correspondence of this nature be sent through Iskra's own channels, and that materials and money be sent to the address of Dietz in Stuttgart:

Verl. J. H. W. Dietz Nachfolger, STUTTGART

The editors of 'Zarya' will always forward on to 'Iskra' whatever reaches them.

Printed at the "Iskra" press.