

Proletarians of All Countries, Unite!

ISKRA

(THE SPARK)

Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party

No. 8

SEPTEMBER 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].

SERF-OWNERS AT WORK

A new law was issued on June 8, 1901, concerning private leasing of vacant crown lands in Siberia. What kind of future does this law promise? We shall soon see, but even now it is not hard to guess, since experience has long taught us to look for the true intentions and interests of the tsarist government and of the landowning classes behind it precisely where its official declarations of good intentions say least about them.

Well-disposed landowning gentlemen have already confirmed, in advance, their satisfaction with the new law: their expectation of cheap and easy privileges has not been disappointed. Public opinion generally, on the other hand, has scarcely had occasion to speak, since our press, obedient as always, has confined itself to a few dry, official announcements.

It is easy to understand why the gentry-landowners should be pleased. The reserve of free land in European Russia has long been exhausted, land prices there have climbed beyond the means of ordinary settlement, and yet the government has stubbornly refused, up to now, to open Siberia's enormous reserves of vacant crown land to the peasant on terms he could actually afford. Now, by the new law, this vast land fund is opened — but not to the peasant. It is opened to 'private persons,' that is, in practice, to precisely those same noble landowners and speculators who already possess more than enough land in European Russia, and who now propose to extend their holdings, and their power over hired labour, into Siberia as well, under specially favourable terms of long-term lease at nominal rents.

[RECONSTRUCTED TEXT] the middle portion of this article, setting out the specific terms of the new law and comparing them with the far harsher conditions still imposed on peasant settlers under existing resettlement statutes, is too degraded in the source scan to translate with confidence[END RECONSTRUCTED TEXT]. The peasant who wishes to resettle in Siberia must still, as before, obtain a formal permit, journey there at his own expense, and content himself with whatever inferior parcel of land the local administration sees fit to allot him, subject to endless bureaucratic delay and exaction. The landowner or speculator, by contrast, need only submit an application and a modest fee to secure, for a term of years, exclusive use of tracts of land far exceeding anything the ordinary settler could ever hope to till with his own two hands — land which he will then, in due course, sublet to those very same peasant settlers on terms of his own choosing, recreating, in the heart of Siberia, precisely that relation of landlord and tenant, of gentry privilege and peasant servitude, from which peasant Russia has never yet been permitted to free itself.

Such is the true meaning of this 'reform,' issued under cover of concern for the development of Siberia's resources: not the opening of the land to the labouring peasant, but the transplanting, to virgin soil, of the very same system of gentry parasitism that has for so long throttled the peasantry of European Russia. The serf-owners, driven from their old estates by the slow but steady growth of peasant resistance and by the gradual erosion of their old privileges, have found in Siberia a new and fertile field for their ancient trade.

THE TSAR'S TAVERN

'It has now been ten years,' certain newspapers write with a note of self-satisfied pride, 'since the state took the sale of spirits into its own hands.' Indeed, it is worth recalling exactly what this state monopoly on vodka has meant in practice for the ten years of its existence, and just how far it has fulfilled the promises made on its behalf when it was first introduced.

The state spirits monopoly was introduced, we were told at the time, in order to combat popular drunkenness, to raise the moral and material condition of the peasantry, and to ensure the sale of a purer, more wholesome product than that supplied by the old private tavern-keepers. Ten years have now passed. Has drunkenness diminished? Has the peasant's condition improved? The government's own figures, scattered though they are through a mass of self-congratulatory prose, tell a rather different story.

[RECONSTRUCTED TEXT] several paragraphs of statistical detail here, on the growth of state liquor revenue over the decade and its comparison with reported consumption figures, are too degraded to translate with confidence[END RECONSTRUCTED TEXT]. What is beyond dispute is this: the state treasury now derives, from the sale of vodka, an income greater than that drawn from almost any other single source, an income that grows steadily from year to year precisely as the peasantry grows poorer and more desperate. The state, which loudly proclaims its concern for the people's sobriety, has in fact become the largest tavern-keeper in the whole of Russia, with every interest in maintaining and even increasing the consumption of spirits, since upon this consumption its own revenues now directly depend.

Nor has the promised improvement in the quality of the product materialised in any consistent fashion: complaints of adulterated, poorly distilled spirit sold under the state label continue to reach us from every quarter, while the officials responsible for inspection, drawn as they are from the very same bureaucracy that profits from the monopoly's revenues, have every incentive to overlook what they ought to expose.

Such is the true face of the 'tsar's tavern': a state that has made itself the chief purveyor of the very poison it claims to be combating, that draws from the peasant's weakness a revenue it dares not relinquish, and that will, we may be certain, continue for many years yet to celebrate the anniversary of this monopoly as though it were a genuine achievement of popular welfare, rather than what it actually is: one more device for extracting, from the poorest and most defenceless of the population, the funds required to maintain the whole apparatus of their own oppression.

FROM OUR PUBLIC LIFE

THE ZEMSTVO CONGRESS

The unofficial, semi-legal congress of zemstvo statisticians and agricultural specialists, which met recently, has once again confirmed a fact that has long been evident to attentive observers: that among the professional employees of our zemstvos there has matured a consciousness of the fundamental incompatibility between genuinely useful, independent professional work and the arbitrary, suspicious tutelage of the provincial administration.

[RECONSTRUCTED TEXT] the greater part of this report is too degraded in the source scan to translate with confidence; the surviving fragments indicate that the congress devoted considerable attention to questions of statistical methodology and to the difficulties created for zemstvo professional staff by arbitrary interference from governors and land captains[END RECONSTRUCTED TEXT]. Several delegates spoke openly of the recent dismissals in Ekaterinoslav and Kharkov provinces (see our previous issue) as symptomatic of a broader pattern, in which competent, independent-minded professionals are increasingly treated by the provincial administration as inherently suspect, regardless of the actual quality or usefulness of their work.

Order for Publication

We reproduce, from official sources, the text of a decree lately issued concerning the reorganisation of provincial excise and taxation offices, involving a substantial increase in the budget allotted to the local trade-and-taxation inspectorate.

FROM KURSK

The Kursk provincial statistical bureau has been effectively paralysed since the spring, following the dismissal of several of its most experienced staff on grounds that were never formally communicated to them.

FROM SIBERIA

Economically, life here has grown noticeably harder over the past year; the price of ordinary necessities has risen sharply, while wages have remained stagnant. In the Yenisei district several villages report growing unrest over the terms of the new resettlement regulations.

BOURGEOIS SCIENCE BEFORE THE MOSCOW WORKERS

Soon after the demonstrative dispersal of the March events in Moscow, the local city authorities, evidently wishing to occupy the workers' leisure hours with something more improving than socialist propaganda, organised, for the benefit of the Moscow working population, a series of popular lectures delivered by professors of the university.

[RECONSTRUCTED TEXT] several sentences describing the practical arrangements and attendance figures are too degraded to translate with confidence[END RECONSTRUCTED TEXT]. The character of this new venture was not long in revealing itself as an attempt to 'delegalise' the Russian labour movement, that is, to draw the workers away from illegal, revolutionary activity by offering them, in its place, respectable and thoroughly harmless amusement under the watchful eye of the authorities.

People of learning, when they involve themselves in this kind of undertaking, do not always stop to consider just how they themselves appear in the eyes of the very workers whose welfare they profess to have at heart. We shall say only this: to sell one's own reputation, one's own scholarly independence, so cheaply, in exchange for a place on a government-sponsored lecture platform — that is a poor bargain indeed, both for the professor and for the workers he addresses.

We have already remarked, on a previous occasion, that professors Dyu and Voronin, both Moscow professors of some renown, deemed it beneath their dignity to answer the questions put to them by workers who attended their lectures, preferring instead to hurry through their prepared material and depart at the earliest opportunity. We can only say that such gentlemen represent themselves poorly, and it is not for lack of anything better that workers continue to attend such gatherings.

As for the workers themselves, when the lectures touch on genuinely useful, factual material, presented without a political varnish, they listen attentively and with evident benefit. But the moment the lecturer strays into the territory of open apology for the existing order, into flattering comparisons between the supposed harmony of present-day Russian society and the class struggles of the West, the audience grows visibly restless, and more than one worker has been heard to remark, on leaving such a lecture, that he had come for science and been given, instead, a sermon.

CHRONICLE OF THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

LETTERS FROM FACTORIES AND WORKS

IN THE KINGDOM OF THE MOROZOVs

FROM BOGORODSK (MOSCOW PROVINCE)

They write to us: life here in Russia generally proceeds along the well-worn track of the factory routine, but here in the Morozov mills it has, of late, taken on especially harsh forms. Wages have been cut twice within the year, each time under the pretext of the 'crisis,' while the working day remains as long as ever. Nowhere in the whole of Russia, perhaps, is the gap between the fabulous wealth of the mill-owners and the wretched poverty of their workers so glaring as it is here, in this district that has given its name to a whole category of proverbial exploitation.

Fines are imposed for the most trivial of infractions: for a few minutes' lateness, for a flaw in the cloth that is, more often than not, the fault of worn-out machinery rather than of the worker himself, for the most innocuous remark to a foreman. The barracks in which the unmarried workers are housed are overcrowded and filthy in the extreme; disease spreads easily in such conditions, and the factory's own hospital, chronically understaffed, can do little to check it.

Under such conditions it is no wonder that discontent simmers here as it does nowhere else. What is needed, more than anywhere else in Russia, is organisation, and it is precisely organisation, thanks to the isolation and ignorance in which the mill-owners have always striven to keep their workers, that is hardest of all to achieve.

THE FACTORY-HOUSING QUESTION IN OREKHOVO-ZUYEVO

Nowhere, perhaps, does the position of dependence in which the factory worker finds himself reveal itself so nakedly as in the question of factory housing. He who lives in company barracks, on company land, is, in the fullest sense of the word, at the mercy of his employer not merely for his wages but for the very roof over his head. Dismissal from work here means, almost automatically, eviction from lodging as well, often on a few hours' notice, regardless of the season or of the presence of young children in the family.

[RECONSTRUCTED TEXT] the detailed description of specific housing conditions and rents is too degraded to translate with confidence[END RECONSTRUCTED TEXT]. Rents charged for these company quarters, wretched as they generally are, absorb a substantial share of the worker's already meagre wage, while any attempt at organised protest against either the rents or the conditions is met with the same weapon: the threat, and not infrequently the reality, of eviction.

From the Editors

We publish the above correspondence from Orekhovo-Zuyevo as characteristic of conditions throughout the whole of the central industrial region, where the 'factory settlement,' combining as it does the roles of employer, landlord and, not infrequently, police authority all in one, has produced a form of dependence scarcely distinguishable, in its practical effect, from serfdom itself.

Allow Me to Shake Your Hand!

At the Kharkov gubernatorial bank, an interesting incident recently occurred, illustrating the peculiar mixture of paternalism and contempt with which the authorities regard even the most modest gestures of independent thought.

Homage to Minister Vladimir Karlovich

Fabrika [the works journal], the organ of Minister Vladimir Karlovich's ministry, devotes an unusually warm article to the minister's recent tour of several provincial factories, in which every fresh instance of the minister's benevolent attention is recorded with a wealth of flattering detail, while not one word is spared for the actual condition of the workers whose interests the ministry is nominally charged with protecting.

FOREIGN REVIEW

LETTERS FROM FRANCE

Letter Two

What, exactly, was the actual position of the two contending currents within French socialism at the moment the split finally became irreversible? The congress of December 1899, which we described in our first letter, had already revealed most of the essential lines of division; the events of the past eighteen months have only sharpened them further.

[RECONSTRUCTED TEXT] several paragraphs here, setting out the specific organisational proposals debated at the recent congresses and the voting alignments among the various component federations of French socialism, are too degraded in the source scan to translate with confidence[END RECONSTRUCTED TEXT]. The essential dividing line remains what it was from the start: on one side, those who hold that a socialist party must, above all else, safeguard its own class independence, refusing all participation in bourgeois ministries and all durable alliance with bourgeois radical parties, however tempting the immediate parliamentary advantages such alliance might seem to offer; on the other, those who hold that the parliamentary republic, imperfect as it is, nonetheless offers a terrain on which socialists can and should seek practical, incremental gains through cooperation with the more advanced elements of bourgeois radicalism, gains that would otherwise remain permanently out of reach.

It would be a mistake, however, to view this dispute as merely a French peculiarity, of no concern to socialists elsewhere. The same fundamental question — participation or non-participation in bourgeois governments, alliance or non-alliance with bourgeois radical parties — will, sooner or later, present itself to every socialist party operating under parliamentary conditions, and the experience of the French comrades, whichever side of the dispute ultimately prevails, will offer lessons of the first importance for the whole international movement.

We shall, in a subsequent letter, examine more closely the resolutions adopted at the respective congresses of the two now formally separated currents, and try to draw out the practical consequences of the split for the everyday work of French socialists in the localities.

FROM THE PARTY

We have received the following letter, addressed to us by the Central Committee of the General Jewish Workers' Union ('the Bund') in Lithuania, Poland and Russia, concerning the national question:

Esteemed comrades!

We are compelled to reject a number of the assertions contained in your No. 7, concerning the position of the Bund on the question of national autonomy. The Bund, as you know, adopted, at its Fourth Congress, a resolution recognising the Jewish proletariat as a distinct nationality, entitled, like every other nationality inhabiting the Russian empire, to national autonomy in the sphere of its own cultural and educational affairs. This resolution was arrived at only after careful and serious discussion of the specific historical position of the Jewish working population, dispersed as it is among the population of many different countries and lacking, unlike other nationalities, any single compact territory of its own.

We regret that our previous issue did not treat this resolution and its underlying reasoning with the fullness it deserves, and we take this opportunity to invite a further, more thorough exchange of views between our two editorial boards on this important question, in the conviction that only through such open and comradely discussion can the various national components of Russian Social-Democracy arrive at a position that does justice both to the unity of the working-class movement as a whole and to the legitimate particular needs of its constituent parts.

Central Committee of the General Jewish Workers' Union in Lithuania, Poland and Russia.

29 August (11 September) 1901.

Note. We must observe, however, that a Social-Democratic party such as the Russian Party, uniting workers of every nationality within a single state into one organisation, cannot found itself upon the principle of national autonomy without risking the fragmentation of a unified class struggle into a series of parallel, mutually isolated national struggles. We shall return to this question in a future issue.

THE POST-BOX

Comrades submitting the collected funds of workers' circles are asked to enclose, along with the money, a note stating for what purpose, in accordance with which appeal, the money was collected. Please state precisely whether the funds are intended for 'general purposes' or are earmarked for something specific. Only under this condition can we account for all sums received accurately and without confusion.

Received: through the St Petersburg representative, 106 r.; through NN, 30 r.; from N., 20 r.; from the Kiev committee, through Y., 30 r., not counting 27 r. for literature; from the Moscow Committee, through Ch., 100 r., through Sh., 21 r., from N. and M., 1 and 3 r.; through V. R., from B. Yu. and R., 17 r.; from Bono, 10 r.; through V. R., 5 r.

From the American groups: forwarded for distribution among strike funds, 13 francs (from the Ivanovo-Voznesensk fund).

Issue No. 2 of 'The Woman Worker' ('Iskra' series) has appeared.

Printed at the "Iskra" press.