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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A LETTER TO AMERICAN WORKINGMEN,
FROM THE SOCIALIST SOVIET REPUBLIC OF RUSSIA ***

A LETTER TO AMERICAN WORKINGMEN

From the Socialist Soviet Republic of Russia

By N. LENIN

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A Letter to American Workingmen

By N. LENIN.

Moscow, August 20, 1918.

Comrades: A Russian Bolshevik who participated in the Revolution of 1905 and for many years afterwards lived in your country has offered to transmit this letter to you. I have grasped this opportunity joyfully for the revolutionary proletariat of America—insofar as it is the enemy of American imperialism—is destined to perform an important task at this time.

The history of modern civilized America opens with one of those really revolutionary wars of liberation of which there have been so few compared with the enormous number of wars of conquest that were caused, like the present imperialistic war, by squabbles among kings,

landholders and capitalists over the division of ill-gotten lands and profits. It was a war of the American people against the English who despoiled America of its resources and held in colonial subjection, just as their "civilized" descendants are draining the life-blood of hundreds of millions of human beings in India, Egypt and all corners and ends of the world to keep them in subjection.

[4] Since that war 150 years have passed. Bourgeois civilization has born its most luxuriant fruit. By developing the productive forces of organized human labor, by utilizing machines and all the wonders of technique America has taken the first place among free and civilized nations. But at the same time America, like a few other nations, has become characteristic for the depth of the abyss that divide a handful of brutal millionaires who are stagnating in a mire of luxury, and millions of laboring starving men and women who are always staring want in the face.

Four years of imperialistic slaughter have left their trace. Irrefutably and clearly events have shown to the people that both imperialistic groups, the English as well as the German, have been playing false. The four years of war have shown in their effects the great law of capitalism in all wars; that he who is richest and mightiest profits the most, takes the greatest share of the spoils while he who is weakest is exploited, martyred, oppressed and outraged to the utmost.

In the number of its colonial possessions, English imperialism has always been more powerful than any of the other countries. England has lost not a span of its "acquired" land. On the other hand it has acquired control of all German colonies in Africa, has occupied Mesopotamia and Palestine.

German imperialism was stronger because of the wonderful organization and ruthless discipline of "its" armies, but as far as colonies are concerned, is much weaker than its opponent. It has now lost all of its colonies, but has robbed half of Europe and throttled most of the small countries and weaker peoples. What a high conception of "liberation" on either side! How well they have defended their fatherlands, these "gentlemen" of both groups, the Anglo-French and the German capitalists together with their lackeys, the Social-Patriots.

[5] American plutocrats are wealthier than those of any other country partly because they are geographically more favorably situated. They have made the greatest profits. They have made all, even the weakest countries, their debtors. They have amassed gigantic fortunes during the war. And every dollar is stained with the blood that was shed by millions of murdered and crippled men, shed in the high, honorable and holy war of freedom.

Had the Anglo-French and American bourgeoisie accepted the Soviet invitation to participate in peace negotiations at Brest-Litovsk, instead of leaving Russia to the mercy of brutal Germany a just peace without annexations and indemnities, a peace based upon complete equality could have been forced upon Germany, and millions of lives might have been saved. Because they hoped to reestablish the Eastern Front by once more drawing us into the whirlpool of warfare, they refused to attend peace negotiations and gave Germany a free hand to cram its shameful terms down the throat of the Russian people. It lay in the power of the Allied countries to make the Brest-Litovsk negotiations the forerunner of a general peace. It ill becomes them to throw the blame for the Russo-German peace upon our shoulders!

The workers of the whole world, in whatever country they may live, rejoice with us and sympathize with us, applaud us for having burst the iron ring of imperialistic agreements and treaties, for having dreaded no sacrifice, however great, to free ourselves, for having established ourselves as a socialist republic, even so rent asunder and plundered by German imperialists, for having raised the banner of peace, the banner of Socialism over the world. What wonder that we are hated by the capitalist class the world over. But this hatred of imperialism and the sympathy of the class-conscious workers of all countries give us assurance of the righteousness of our cause.

[6] He is no Socialist who cannot understand that one cannot and must not hesitate to bring even that greatest of sacrifice, the sacrifice of territory, that one must be ready to accept even military defeat at the hands of imperialism in the interests of victory over the bourgeoisie, in the interests of a transfer of power to the working-class. For the sake of "their" cause, that is for the conquest of world-power, the imperialists of England and Germany have not hesitated to ruin a whole row of nations, from Belgium and Servia to Palestine and Mesopotamia. Shall we then hesitate to act in the name of the liberation of the workers of the world from the yoke of capitalism, in the name of a general honorable peace; shall we wait until we can find a way that entails no sacrifice; shall we be afraid to begin the fight until an easy victory is assured; shall we place the integrity and safety of this "fatherland" created by the bourgeoisie over the interests of the international socialist revolution?

We have been attacked for coming to terms with German militarism. Is there no difference between a pact entered upon by Socialists and a bourgeoisie (native or foreign) against the working-class, against labor, and an agreement that is made between a working-class that has overthrown its own bourgeoisie and a bourgeoisie of one side against a bourgeoisie of another nationality for the protection of the proletariat? Shall we not exploit the antagonism that exists between the various groups of the bourgeoisie. In reality every European understands this difference, and the American people, as I will presently show, have had a very similar experience in its own history. There are agreements and agreements, fagots et fagots, as the Frenchman says.

When the robber-barons of German imperialism threw their armies into defenseless,

demobilized Russia in February 1918 when Russia had staked its hopes upon the international solidarity of the proletariat before the international revolution had completely ripened, I did not hesitate for a moment to come to certain agreements with French Monarchists. The French captain Sadoul, who sympathized in words with the Bolsheviki while in deeds he was the faithful servant of French imperialism, brought the French officer de Lubersac to me. "I am a Monarchist. My only purpose is the overthrow of Germany," de Lubersac declared to me. "That is self understood (cela va sans dire)," I replied. But this by no means prevented me from coming to an understanding with de Lubersac concerning certain services that French experts in explosives were ready to render in order to hold up the German advance by the destruction of railroad lines. This is an example of the kind of agreement that every class-conscious worker must be ready to adopt, an agreement in the interest of Socialism. We shook hands with the French Monarchists although we knew that each one of us would rather have seen the other hang. But temporarily our interests were identical. To throw back the rapacious advancing German army we made use of the equally greedy interests of their opponents, thereby serving the interests of the Russian and the international socialist revolution.

In this way we furthered the cause of the working-class of Russia and of other countries; in this way we strengthened the proletariat and weakened the bourgeoisie of the world by making use of the usual and absolutely legal practice of manoeuvring, shifting and waiting for the moment the rapidly growing proletarian revolution in the more highly developed nations had ripened.

Long ago the American people used these tactics to the advantage of its revolution. When America waged its great war of liberation against the English oppressors, it likewise entered into negotiations with other oppressors, with the French and the Spaniards who at that time owned a considerable portion of what is now the United States. In its desperate struggle for freedom the American people made "agreements" with one group of oppressors against the other for the purpose of weakening all oppressors and strengthening those who were struggling against tyranny. The American people utilized the antagonism that existed between the English and the French, at times even fighting side by side with the armies of one group of oppressors, the French and the Spanish against the others, the English. Thus it vanquished first the English and then freed itself (partly by purchase) from the dangerous proximity of the French and Spanish possessions.

The great Russian revolutionist Tchernychewski once said: Political activity is not as smooth as the pavement of the Nevski Prospect. He is no revolutionist who would have the revolution of the proletariat only under the "condition" that it proceed smoothly and in an orderly manner, that guarantees against defeat be given beforehand, that the revolution go forward along the broad, free, straight path to victory, that there shall not be here and there the heaviest sacrifices, that we shall not have to lie in wait in besieged fortresses, shall not have to climb up along the narrowest path, the most impassible, winding, dangerous mountain roads. He is no revolutionist, he has not yet freed himself from the pedantry of bourgeois intellectualism, he will fall back, again and again, into the camp of the counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie.

They are little more than imitators of the bourgeoisie, these gentlemen who delight in holding up to us the "chaos" of revolution, the "destruction" of industry, the unemployment, the lack of food. Can there be anything more hypocritical than such accusations from people who greeted and supported the imperialistic war and made common cause with Kerensky when he continued the war? Is not this imperialistic war the cause of all our misfortune? The revolution that was born by the war must necessarily go on through the terrible difficulties and sufferings that war created, through this heritage of destruction and reactionary mass murder. To accuse us of "destruction" of industries and "terror" is hypocrisy or clumsy pedantry, shows an incapability of understanding the most elemental fundamentals of the raging, climatic force of the class struggle, called Revolution.

In words our accusers "recognize" this kind of class struggle, in deeds they revert again and again to the middle class utopia of "class-harmony" and the mutual "interdependence" of classes upon one another. In reality the class struggle in revolutionary times has always inevitably taken on the form of civil war, and civil war is unthinkable without the worst kind of destruction, without terror and limitations of form of democracy in the interests of the war. One must be a sickly sentimentalist not to be able to see, to understand and appreciate this necessity. Only the Tchechov type of the lifeless "Man in the Box" can denounce the Revolution for this reason instead of throwing himself into the fight with the whole vehemence and decision of his soul at a moment when history demands that the highest problems of humanity be solved by struggle and war.

The best representatives of the American proletariat—those representatives who have repeatedly given expression to their full solidarity with us, the Bolsheviki, are the expression of this revolutionary tradition in the life of the American people. This tradition originated in the war of liberation against the English in the 18th and the Civil War in the 19th century. Industry and commerce in 1870 were in a much worse position than in 1860. But where can you find an American so pedantic, so absolutely idiotic who would deny the revolutionary and progressive significance of the American Civil War of 1860-1865?

The representatives of the bourgeoisie understand very well that the overthrow of slavery was well worth the three years of Civil War, the depth of destruction, devastation and terror that were its accompaniment. But these same gentlemen and the reform socialists who have allowed themselves to be cowed by the bourgeoisie and tremble at the thought of a revolution, cannot,

may will not, see the necessity and righteousness of a civil war in Russia, though it is facing a far greater task, the work of abolishing capitalist wage slavery and overthrowing the rule of the bourgeoisie.

[10] The American working class will not follow the lead of its bourgeoisie. It will go with us against the bourgeoisie. The whole history of the American people gives me this confidence, this conviction. I recall with pride the words of one of the best loved leaders of the American proletariat, Eugene V. Debs, who said in the "Appeal to Reason" at the end of 1915, when it was still a socialist paper, in an article entitled "Why Should I Fight?" that he would rather be shot than vote for war credits to support the present criminal and reactionary war, that he knows only one war that is sanctified and justified from the standpoint of the proletariat: the war against the capitalist class, the war for the liberation of mankind from wage slavery. I am not surprised that this fearless man was thrown into prison by the American bourgeoisie. Let them brutalize true internationalists, the real representatives of the revolutionary proletariat. The greater the bitterness and brutality they sow, the nearer is the day of the victorious proletarian revolution.

We are accused of having brought devastation upon Russia. Who is it that makes these accusations? The train-bearers of the bourgeoisie, of that same bourgeoisie that almost completely destroyed the culture of Europe, that has dragged the whole continent back to barbarism, that has brought hunger and destruction to the world. This bourgeoisie now demands that we find a different basis for our Revolution than that of destruction, that we shall not build it up upon the ruins of war, with human beings degraded and brutalized by years of warfare. O, how human, how just is this bourgeoisie!

Its servants charge us with the use of terroristic methods.—Have the English forgotten their 1649, the French their 1793? Terror was just and justified when it was employed by the bourgeoisie for its own purposes against feudal domination. But terror becomes criminal when workingmen and poverty stricken peasants dare to use it against the bourgeoisie. Terror was just and justified when it was used to put one exploiting minority in the place of another. But terror becomes horrible and criminal when it is used to abolish all exploiting minorities, when it is employed in the cause of the actual majority, in the cause of the proletariat and the semi-proletariat, of the working-class and the poor peasantry.

[11] The bourgeoisie of international imperialism has succeeded in slaughtering 10 millions, in crippling 20 millions in its war. Should our war, the war of the oppressed and the exploited, against oppressors and exploiters cost a half or a whole million victims in all countries, the bourgeoisie would still maintain that the victims of the world war died a righteous death, that those of the civil war were sacrificed for a criminal cause.

But the proletariat, even now, in the midst of the horrors of war, is learning the great truth that all revolutions teach, the truth that has been handed down to us by our best teachers, the founders of modern Socialism. From them we have learned that a successful revolution is inconceivable unless it breaks the resistance of the exploiting class. When the workers and the laboring peasants took hold of the powers of state, it became our duty to quell the resistance of the exploiting class. We are proud that we have done it, that we are doing it. We only regret that we did not do it, at the beginning, with sufficient firmness and decision.

We realize that the mad resistance of the bourgeoisie against the socialist revolution in all countries is unavoidable. We know too, that with the development of this revolution, this resistance will grow. But the proletariat will break down this resistance and in the course of its struggle against the bourgeoisie the proletariat will finally become ripe for victory and power.

Let the corrupt bourgeois press trumpet every mistake that is made by our Revolution out into the world. We are not afraid of our mistakes. The beginning of the revolution has not sanctified humanity. It is not to be expected that the working classes who have been exploited and forcibly held down by the clutches of want, of ignorance and degradation for centuries should conduct its revolution without mistakes. The dead body of bourgeois society cannot simply be put into a coffin and buried. It rots in our midst, poisons the air we breathe, pollutes our lives, clings to the new, the fresh, the living with a thousand threads and tendrils of old customs, of death and decay.

[12] But for every hundred of our mistakes that are heralded into the world by the bourgeoisie and its sycophants, there are ten thousand great deeds of heroism, greater and more heroic because they seem so simple and unpretentious, because they take place in the everyday life of the factory districts or in secluded villages, because they are the deeds of people who are not in the habit of proclaiming their every success to the world, who have no opportunity to do so.

But even if the contrary were true,—I know, of course, that this is not so—but even if we had committed 10,000 mistakes to every 100 wise and righteous deeds, yes, even then our revolution would be great and invincible. And it will go down in the history of the world as unconquerable. For the first time in the history of the world not the minority, not alone the rich and the educated, but the real masses, the huge majority of the working-class itself, are building up a new world, are deciding the most difficult questions of social organization from out of their own experience.

Every mistake that is made in this work, in this honestly conscientious cooperation of ten million plain workingmen and peasants in the re-creation of their entire lives—every such mistake is worth thousands and millions of "faultless" successes of the exploiting minority, in outwitting and taking advantage of the laboring masses. For only through these mistakes can the

workers and peasants learn to organize their new existence, to get along without the capitalist class. Only thus will they be able to blaze their way, through thousands of hindrances to victorious socialism.

Mistakes are being made by our peasants who, at one stroke in the night from October 25 to October 26, (Russian Calendar) 1917, did away with all private ownership of land, and are now struggling, from month to month, under the greatest difficulties, to correct their own mistakes, trying to solve in practice the most difficult problems of organizing a new social state, fighting against profiteers to secure the possession of the land for the worker instead of for the speculator, to carry on agricultural production under a system of communist farming on a large scale.

[13] Mistakes are being made by our workmen in their revolutionary activity, who, in a few short months, have placed practically all of the larger factories and workers under state ownership, and are now learning, from day to day, under the greatest difficulties, to conduct the management of entire industries, to reorganize industries already organized, to overcome the deadly resistance of laziness and middle-class reaction and egotism. Stone upon stone they are building the foundation for a new social community, the self-discipline of labor, the new rule of the labor organizations of the working-class over their members.

Mistakes are being made in their revolutionary activity by the Soviets which were first created in 1905 by the gigantic upheaval of the masses. The Workmen's and Peasant's Soviets are a new type of state, a new highest form of Democracy, a particular form of the dictatorship of the proletariat, a mode of conducting the business of the state without the bourgeoisie and against the bourgeoisie. For the first time democracy is placed at the service of the masses, of the workers, and ceases to be a democracy for the rich, as it is, in the last analysis, in all capitalist, yes, in all democratic republics. For the first time the masses of the people, in a nation of hundreds of millions, are fulfilling the task of realizing the dictatorship of the proletariat and the semi-proletariat, without which socialism is not to be thought of.

[14] Let incurable pedants, crammed full of bourgeois democratic and parliamentary prejudices, shake their heads gravely over our Soviets, let them deplore the fact that we have no direct elections. These people have forgotten nothing, have learned nothing in the great upheaval of 1914-1918. The combination of the dictatorship of the proletariat with the new democracy of the proletariat, of civil war with the widest application of the masses to political problems, such a combination cannot be achieved in a day, cannot be forced into the battered forms of formal parliamentary democratism. In the Soviet Republic there arises before us a new world, the world of Socialism. Such a world cannot be materialized as if by magic, complete in every detail, as Minerva sprang from Jupiter's head.

While the old bourgeoisie democratic constitutions, for instance, proclaimed formal equality and the right of free assemblage, the constitution of the Soviet Republic repudiates the hypocrisy of a formal equality of all human beings. When the bourgeoisie republicans overturned feudal thrones, they did not recognize the rules of formal equality of monarchists. Since we here are concerned with the task of overthrowing the bourgeoisie, only fools or traitors will insist on the formal equality of the bourgeoisie. The right of free assemblage is not worth an iota to the workman and to the peasant when all better meeting places are in the hands of the bourgeoisie. Our Soviets have taken over all usable buildings in the cities and towns out of the hands of the rich and have placed them at the disposal of the workmen and peasants for meeting and organization purposes. That is how our right of assemblage looks—for the workers. That is the meaning and content of our Soviet, of our socialist constitution.

And for this reason we are all firmly convinced that the Soviet Republic, whatever misfortune may still lie in store for it, is unconquerable.

It is unconquerable because every blow that comes from the powers of madly raging imperialism, every new attack by the international bourgeoisie will bring new, and hitherto unaffected strata of workingmen and peasants into the fight, will educate them at the cost of the greatest sacrifice, making them hard as steel, awakening a new heroism in the masses.

[15] We know that it may take a long time before help can come from you, comrades, American Workingmen, for the development of the revolution in the different countries proceeds along various paths, with varying rapidity (how could it be otherwise!) We know full well that the outbreak of the European proletarian revolution may take many weeks to come, quickly as it is ripening in these days. We are counting on the inevitability of the international revolution. But that does not mean that we count upon its coming at some definite, nearby date. We have experienced two great revolutions in our own country, that of 1905 and that of 1917, and we know that revolutions cannot come neither at a word of command nor according to prearranged plans. We know that circumstances alone have pushed us, the proletariat of Russia, forward, that we have reached this new stage in the social life of the world not because of our superiority but because of the peculiarly reactionary character of Russia. But until the outbreak of the international revolution, revolutions in individual countries may still meet with a number of serious setbacks and overthrows.

And yet we are certain that we are invincible, for if humanity will not emerge from this imperialistic massacre broken in spirit, it will triumph. Ours was the first country to break the chains of imperialistic warfare. We broke them with the greatest sacrifice, but they are broken. We stand outside of imperialistic duties and considerations, we have raised the banner of the

fight for the complete overthrow of imperialism for the world.

We are in a beleaguered fortress, so long as no other international socialist revolution comes to our assistance with its armies. But these armies exist, they are stronger than ours, they grow, they strive, they become more invincible the longer imperialism with its brutalities continues. Workingmen the world over are breaking with their betrayers, with their Gompers and their Scheidemanns. Inevitably labor is approaching communistic Bolshevistic tactics, is preparing for the proletarian revolution that alone is capable of preserving culture and humanity from destruction.

We are invincible, for invincible is the Proletarian Revolution.

[16]

The Class Struggle Devoted to International Socialism

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