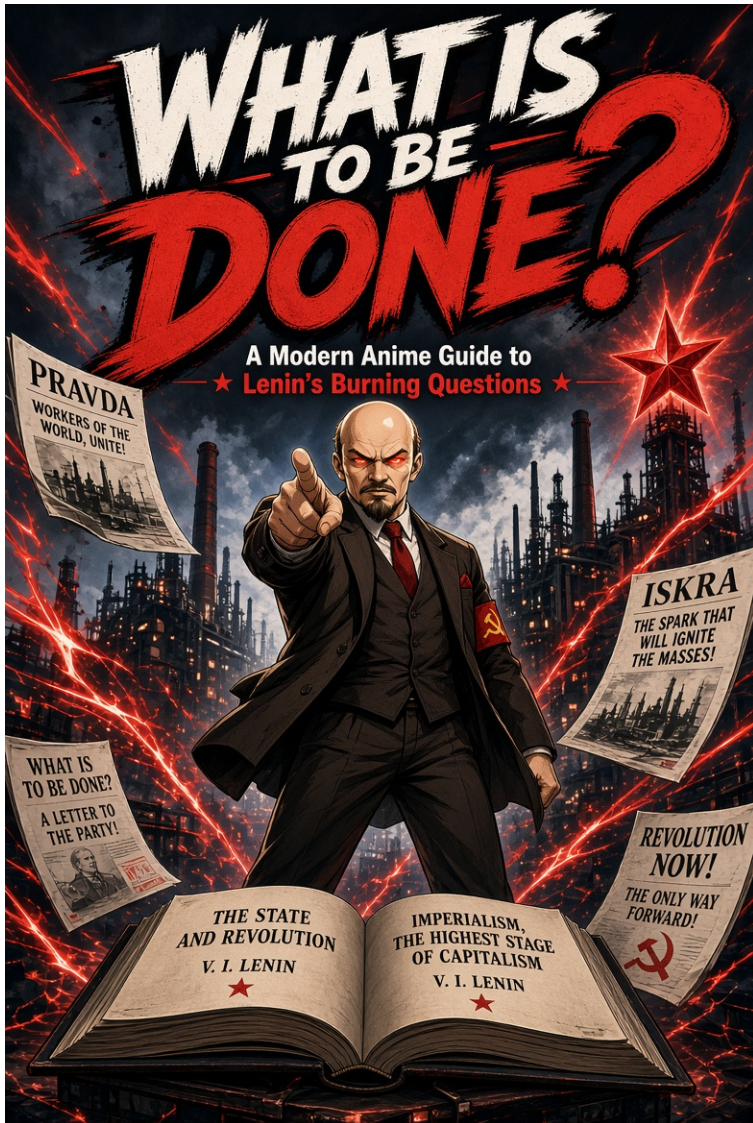




WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

An Educational Guide to Lenin's 1902 Pamphlet

Core Idea: The working class, left to itself, develops only trade-union consciousness. Socialist political consciousness must be brought from outside by a disciplined organization of professional revolutionaries — the vanguard party.

This booklet combines clear explanations of Lenin's arguments with modern cartoon illustrations that dramatize the key ideas. It is designed for study and discussion.

Written 1901–1902 • Published March 1902
One of the most influential political texts of the 20th century

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1. Historical Context

At the turn of the 20th century the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) was still young and fragmented. Revolutionaries operated under the Tsarist autocracy, facing constant police surveillance. Many activists worked in small, isolated local circles.

Two tendencies especially worried Lenin:

- **Economism** — the view that workers should focus mainly on economic struggles (wages, hours, conditions) and that political demands would grow naturally from them.
- **Revisionism / Opportunism** — associated with Eduard Bernstein, which sought to turn Social-Democracy into a party of gradual reform rather than revolution.

Lenin wrote *What Is to Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement* between autumn 1901 and February 1902. The title comes from the famous 1863 novel by Nikolai Chernyshevsky, a work that had deeply influenced earlier Russian radicals.

2. Structure of the Pamphlet

I. Dogmatism and “Freedom of Criticism”

Attacks the slogan of unrestricted “freedom of criticism” as a cover for introducing opportunist ideas.

II. The Spontaneity of the Masses and the Consciousness of the Social-Democrats

The most famous section. Pure spontaneity produces only trade-union consciousness; socialist consciousness must be introduced from outside.

III. Trade-Unionist Politics and Social-Democratic Politics

The ideal is the “tribune of the people,” not merely a trade-union secretary.

IV. The Primitiveness of the Economists and the Organization of the Revolutionaries

Calls for a stable organization of professional revolutionaries.

V. The “Plan” for an All-Russia Political Newspaper

A regular national newspaper as collective propagandist, agitator and organizer.

3. Against Opportunism

Lenin opens by attacking the slogan “freedom of criticism.” He argues it is often used as a Trojan horse to smuggle reformist and opportunist ideas into the revolutionary movement, diluting Marxism into something weak and harmless.



Cartoon: The opportunist waters down revolutionary theory while Lenin insists on theoretical firmness.

4. Spontaneity vs. Consciousness

This is the intellectual heart of the book. Lenin observes that workers, through their own experience of economic struggle, naturally develop **trade-union consciousness**: the understanding that they must unite in unions, fight employers, and press for better labour laws.

However, this is not the same as full **Social-Democratic (socialist) consciousness** — a political understanding of the whole class structure of society and the need for revolutionary change.

*“Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers **only from without**; that is, only from outside the economic struggle, from outside the sphere of relations between workers and employers.”*

The task of Social-Democracy is therefore to combat the spontaneous tendency of the workers' movement to remain within bourgeois limits and to bring it under the banner of revolutionary theory.



Cartoon: Workers fight for higher wages and shorter hours — necessary but not sufficient. Revolutionary theory must come from outside the pure economic struggle.

5. Tribune of the People

Lenin draws a sharp distinction between two models of activist:

- The **trade-union secretary** deals mainly with the economic interests of a particular group of workers.
- The **tribune of the people** reacts to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter which class is affected, and generalizes these cases into a comprehensive picture of class rule.

"Working-class consciousness cannot be genuine political consciousness unless the workers are trained to respond to all cases of tyranny... no matter what class is affected."



Cartoon: Daily union office work versus the tribune who connects every injustice into one struggle.

6. The Vanguard Party

To introduce and sustain socialist consciousness under a repressive autocracy, Lenin called for a particular type of organization:

- A relatively small, tightly organized core of **professional revolutionaries** — people who devote their lives to revolutionary work and are trained in underground techniques.
- This core must be as secret and centralized as necessary to survive police persecution.
- Around it, a much wider network of supporters and ordinary workers can participate.

Lenin's key organizational points: no durable movement without a stable organization of leaders; the more the masses are drawn in, the more necessary such an organization becomes; membership should consist chiefly of professional revolutionaries; restricting the core actually enables broader mass participation.



Cartoon: The vanguard party as a stable core that enables the wider movement to grow stronger.

7. The All-Russia Newspaper

Theory and organization needed a concrete instrument. Lenin proposed a regular all-Russia political newspaper (he had *Iskra* — “The Spark” — in mind) that would serve as:

- A collective **propagandist** — spreading consistent Marxist ideas.
- A collective **agitator** — responding to current events and exposing the regime.
- A collective **organizer** — linking scattered local circles and training new cadres.

The newspaper would help overcome the isolation and “primitiveness” of purely local work, turning disconnected sparks into a coordinated force.



Cartoon: Iskra as the national political newspaper that connects factories, cities and workers' circles across Russia.

8. Key Quotations

"Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement."

"Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers only from without."

"The Social-Democrat's ideal should not be the trade-union secretary, but the tribune of the people."

"Give us an organization of revolutionaries, and we will overturn Russia!"

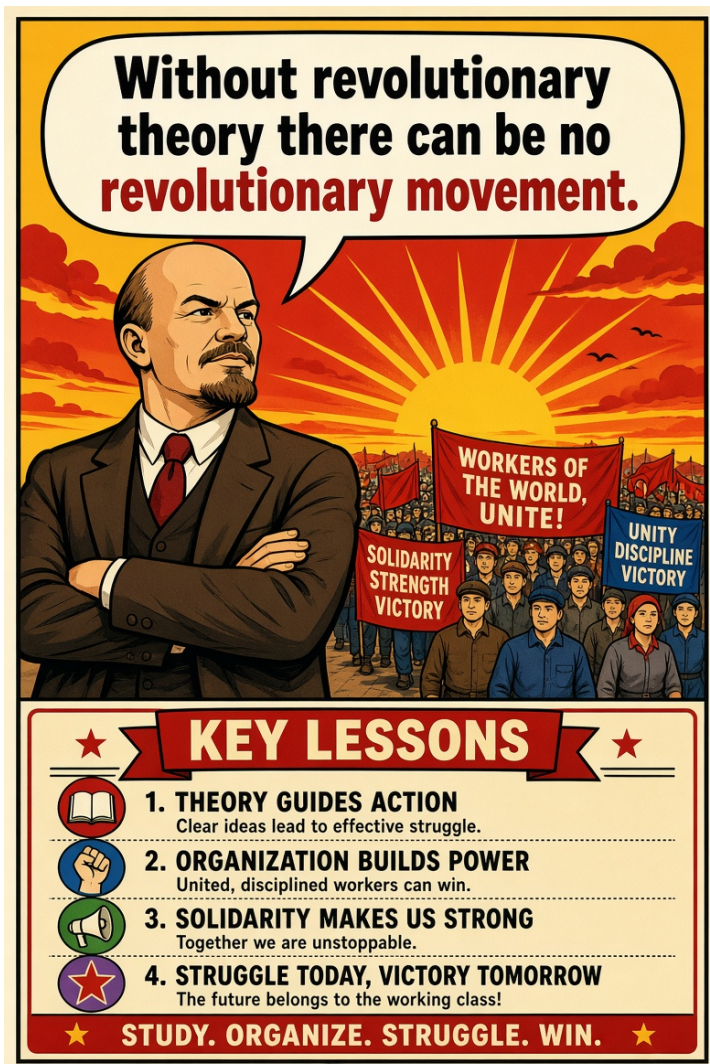
9. Historical Legacy

What Is to Be Done? became a founding text of Bolshevism. Its organizational ideas helped shape the party that took power in 1917. The book has been intensely debated ever since:

- Supporters see it as a realistic answer to building a revolutionary party under repression.
- Critics argue that the emphasis on a centralized vanguard opened the door to substitution of the party for the class and later authoritarianism.

Regardless of political evaluation, the pamphlet remains essential for understanding the ideological origins of 20th-century communist parties.

10. Key Lessons



Final cartoon page summarizing the central message and four practical lessons.

Key Takeaways for Students

- 1. Theory matters.** Spontaneous struggle alone is not enough; clear revolutionary theory is required to give direction.
- 2. Organization matters.** Under repression, a stable core of trained professional revolutionaries is necessary for continuity.
- 3. Politics is broader than economics.** Genuine class consciousness requires responding to all forms of oppression.
- 4. Leadership is active.** The party works to raise the level of the masses rather than simply reflecting it.
- 5. A unifying instrument is needed.** A regular national medium can serve as propagandist, agitator and organizer.
- 6. Context is crucial.** Lenin wrote for underground revolutionaries in Tsarist Russia. Mechanical application elsewhere requires care.

Suggested Further Reading

- Full text of *What Is to Be Done?* on the Marxists Internet Archive (free).
- Lenin's short article "Where to Begin" (1901) — the direct precursor.
- Any solid history of the Russian revolutionary movement 1900–1917 for context.

End of Booklet

This guide combines explanation and illustration. It does not replace reading the original text.