Chapter 3

Announcement in Rabochee Delo No. 5

In Rabochee Delo No. 5, the Editorial Board announced its intention of publishing a collection of articles reflecting the various opinions expressed during the ‘revisionist controversy’, a programmatic debate which had divided the German Social Democracy since the death of Engels in 1895. This debate had begun with the publication of a series of articles by leading Party theoretician Eduard Bernstein (1850–1932) in the German Party’s theoretical journal, Die Neue Zeit, challenging the Marxist analysis of the capitalist economic system and its conception of socialism based on the common ownership of society’s economic resources. Rejecting these ideas, Bernstein had argued that socialism was compatible with capitalism and thus advocated a non-revolutionary strategy based on the gradual extension of democratic and social rights to the working class. At the time of Rabochee Delo’s announcement, the overwhelming majority of the German Social Democracy had expressed itself in favour of the Party’s 1891 programme (the Erfurt Programme) whilst only a minority had publicly expressed support for Bernstein’s views. Nonetheless it seems that Rabochee Delo regarded such a debate as useful in a period when the RSDLP as a whole had still not adopted a political programme, and in this respect it could be said to leave the journal’s support for Marxist ideas open to question.

Indeed, at first glance it seems that the journal poses as a ‘neutral’ in this debate, refusing to state its own theoretical position, and only promising to do so once the pamphlet appears. However, it is significant that, whilst offering to introduce various German theoretical authorities to a Russian audience, including those authorities who ostensibly lacked political support inside the German Party, nothing is said of the ‘Emancipation of Labour’ group’s efforts to adapt Marxism to Russian conditions and to give the Russian Social Democrats a

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1 In other words, the second part of Rabochee Delo Nos. 4–5 (September–December 1899).
2 Seven articles appeared under the title ‘Probleme des Sozialismus’ (‘Problems of Socialism’) in Die Neue Zeit XV (1896–7) i: 6, 7, 10, 25; ii: 30 & 31.
3 The 1898 German Social-Democratic Party Congress (‘Stuttgart Congress’) overwhelmingly opposed a statement of Bernstein’s views and a debate at the ‘Hanover Congress’ of the following year, which is referred to in the article, produced the same outcome. Bernstein could not attend either of these events as an arrest warrant relating to him from the period of Bismarck’s Anti-Socialist Laws (1878–91) had still not expired – it was revoked in 1901. He sent a letter detailing his views to the Stuttgart meeting and a colleague, Eduard David (1863–1930), defended his views at Hanover.
programme, or of Plekhanov’s own energetic intervention in the revisionist debate. It is hard not to interpret silence on these contributions as disapproval, and as a result, it is tempting to conclude that Rabochee Delo was rather eager to hear alternatives to Plekhanovite views and that it would eventually side with these views. Thus, despite its firm rejection of consistent ‘Economism’ as a practical strategy, the impression is obtained that Rabochee Delo at the very least took a tolerant attitude towards theoretical revision of Marxist ideas.

This does not automatically imply that Rabochee Delo aimed to convert itself into a pro-revisionist journal which published attacks on theoretical Marxism. As with the previous documents, the main aim here appears to have been the reduction of the influence of the ‘Emancipation of Labour’ Group: having failed to separate Lenin and his co-thinkers from the Marxist emigration, it is possible that Rabochee Delo actually aimed to give a helping hand to any revisionist right wing mainly as a self-interested tactic. Specifically, its own programmatic preferences could have served as a compromise acceptable to both the followers of Plekhanov and the followers of Kuskova in the event of a sharp conflict between two such factions. Naturally, such a situation depended on the actual existence of a ‘Kuskovite’ tendency and the open discussion of the German controversy could have given occasion for such a tendency to form. Conversely, the absence of any such a tendency would only prove Rabochee Delo’s point in their controversy with Axelrod, thus giving them credit among the signatories of the Protest and perhaps weakening the latter’s connections with the ‘Emancipation of Labour’ group. Thus, regardless of the outcome of this appeal for articles, Rabochee Delo could reasonably hope to strengthen its position within the RSDLP on the basis of some quite astute political calculations.

From the Editorial Board of Rabochee Delo
Regarding the Publication of a Theoretical Anthology

The Social-Democratic press of Western Europe and especially that of Germany has now been occupied with a review of the scientific basis of socialism, the programme and the tactics of the workers’ movement, for two years. One of

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