Table of Contents

Activism

Bordiga, Amadeo
1952

The following article Bordiga writes about "an illness of the workers movement" – namely *activism*. Based on the libcom.org article, which in refers to the Spanish translation.

It is necessary to insist on the word. Just like certain infections of the blood, which cause a wide range of illnesses, not excepting those which can be cured in the madhouse, activism is an illness of the workers movement that requires continuous treatment.

Activism always claims to possess the correct understanding of the circumstances of political struggle, and that it is "equal to the situation", but it is incapable of engaging in a realistic evaluation of the relations of force, enormously exaggerating the possibilities of the subjective factors of the class struggle.

It is therefore natural that those affected by activism react to this criticism by accusing their adversaries of underestimating the subjective factors of the class struggle and of reducing historical determinism to that automatic mechanism which is also the target of the usual bourgeois critique of Marxism. That is why we said, in Point 2 of Part IV of our "Fundamental Theses of the Party":

> ... [t]he capitalist mode of production expands and prevails in all countries, under its technical and social aspects, in a more or less continuous way. The alternatives of the clashing class forces are instead connected to the events of the general historical struggle, to the contrast that already existed when bourgeoisie [began to] rule [over] the feudal and precapitalistic classes, and to the evolutionary political process of the two historical rival classes, bourgeoisie and proletariat; being such a process marked by victories and defeats, by errors of tactical and strategical method.

This amounts to saying that we maintain that the stage of the resumption of the revolutionary workers movement does not coincide only with the impulses from the contradictions of the material, economic and social development of bourgeois society, which can experience periods of extremely serious crises, of violent conflicts, of political collapse, without the workers movement as a result being radicalized and adopting extreme revolutionary positions. That is, there is no automatic mechanism in the field of the relations between the capitalist economy and the revolutionary proletarian party.

It could be the case, as in our current situation, that the economic and social world of the bourgeoisie is riddled with serious tremors that produce violent conflicts, but without the revolutionary party obtaining as a result any possibilities of expanding its activity, without the masses subjected to the most atrocious exploitation and fratricidal massacres being capable of unmasking the opportunist agents, who

implicate their fate with the disputes of imperialism, without the counterrevolution loosening its iron grip on the ruled class, on the masses of the dispossessed.

To say, "An objectively revolutionary situation exists, but the subjective element of the class struggle, the class party, is deficient", is wrong at every moment of the historical process; it is a blatantly meaningless assertion, a patent absurdity.

It is true, however, that in every wave of struggle, even those that pose the greatest threat to the existence of bourgeois rule, even when it seems that everything (the machinery of state, the social hierarchy, the bourgeois political apparatus, the trade unions, the propaganda system) has come to a halt and is heading towards its end, to its destruction, the situation will never be revolutionary, but will for all intents and purposes be counterrevolutionary, if the revolutionary class party is weak, underdeveloped and theoretically unstable.

A situation of profound crisis in bourgeois society is susceptible to leading to a movement of revolutionary subversion when "... the 'lower classes' do not want to live in the old way and the 'upper classes' cannot carry on in the old way...." (Lenin, "Left-Wing Communism", An Infantile Disorder), that is, when the ruling class can no longer effectively operate its own mechanism of repression, and when "... a majority of the workers ... fully realise that revolution is necessary".

Such a consciousness on the part of the workers can only be expressed in the class party, which is in the last analysis the determinant factor of the transformation of the bourgeois crisis into the revolutionary catastrophe of all of society.

It is therefore necessary, in order to save society from the "mare magnum" in which it has fallen, and for which purpose the ruling class is incapable of offering any help, because it is incapable of discovering the appropriate new forms for liberating the productive forces and directing them towards new development, that there should be a collective revolutionary organ of thought and of action that will channel and illuminate the subversive will of the masses.

The "not wanting to live in the old way" of the masses, the will to struggle, the impulse to act against the class enemy, presuppose, within the ranks of the proletarian vanguard that is called upon to develop the function of guide of the revolutionary masses, the crystallization of a solid revolutionary theory.

In the party, consciousness precedes action, unlike what takes place among the masses and at the level of the individual.

If, however, someone were to say that this is nothing new, nothing really modern, and inquire whether we are trying to turn the revolutionary party into a small circle of scholars, of theoretical observers of social reality? Never. In Point 7 of Part IV of our 1951 "Fundamental Theses of the Party", we read:

> Although small in number and having but few [connections] with the proletarian masses, in fact jealously attached to its theoretical tasks, which are of prime importance, the Party, because of this true appreciation of its revolutionary duties in the present period, refuses to become a circle of thinkers or of those searching for new truths, of 'renovators' considering as insufficient the past truth, and absolutely refuses to be considered as such.

Nothing could be more clear!

The transformation of the bourgeois crisis into class war and revolution presupposes the objective collapse of the social and political framework of capitalism, but this is not even potentially possible if the great mass of the workers is not won over

to or influenced by the revolutionary theory disseminated by the party, a theory that is not improvised on the barricades. But will this theory perhaps be distilled behind closed doors by scholarly labors without any connection to the masses?

In response to this stupid accusation made by the fanatics of activism, one may quite correctly respond that, the indefatigable and assiduous labor of defense waged on behalf of the doctrinal and critical patrimony of the movement, the everyday tasks of immunization of the movement against the poisons of revisionism, the systematic explanation, in the light of Marxism, of the most recent forms of organization of capitalist production, the unmasking of the attempts on the part of opportunism to present such "innovations" as anti-capitalist measures, etc., all of this is struggle, the struggle against the class enemy, the struggle to educate the revolutionary vanguard, it is, if you prefer, an active struggle that is nonetheless not activism.

Do you seriously believe (while the whole gigantic bourgeois machine is committed from morning to night, not so much, please note, in refuting the revolutionary theory, as it is in demonstrating that socialist demands can be realized against Marx and against Lenin, and when not only political parties but also established governments swear that they govern, that is, oppress, the masses, in the name of communism) that the arduous and exhausting task of restoring the revolutionary Marxist critique, is merely a theoretical undertaking?

Who would dare to deny that it is also a political labor, an active struggle against the class enemy? Only he who is possessed by the demons of activist action could think such a thing.

The movement, even if it is weak in terms of numbers of adherents, that works on its newspapers, on its meetings, on holding factory discussions, to free revolutionary theory from unprecedented adulterations, from opportunist contaminations, thus performs a revolutionary labor, a labor for the proletarian revolution.

By no means can it be said that we conceive the task of the party as a "struggle of ideas".

Totalitarianism, State Capitalism, and the downfall of the socialist revolution in Russia are not "ideas" against which we oppose our own ideas: they are real historical phenomena, which have eviscerated the proletarian movement by leading it onto the treacherous terrain of anti-fascist partisan formations, the ranks of the fascists, the national front, pacifism, etc.

Those who, even if they are few in number and far removed from the limelight of "grand politics", carry out a labor of Marxist interpretation of these real phenomena and a labor of confirmation of Marxist predictions (and it seems to us that there has been no serious examination of these problems outside of the fundamental positions advocated in our Prometeo, and especially in the study, "Property and Capital"), are nonetheless assuredly performing a revolutionary task, because they are establishing from this point on the itinerary and the starting point of the proletarian revolution.

The resumption of the revolutionary movement does not require, for its realization, the crisis of the capitalist system as a potential eventuality; the crisis in the capitalist mode of production is already a reality, the bourgeoisie has experienced all the possible stages of its historical career, State Capitalism and imperialism mark the extreme limits of its evolution, but the fundamental contradictions of the system persist and are becoming more acute. The crisis of capitalism has not been transformed into the revolutionary crisis of society, into a revolutionary class war, and the counterrevolution is still triumphant even though capitalist chaos gets worse, because the workers movement is still crushed under the weight of the defeats it

suffered over the last thirty years due to the strategic errors committed by the communist parties of the Third International, errors that have led the proletariat to look upon the weapons of the counterrevolution as its own weapons.

The resumption of the revolutionary movement is still nowhere in sight because the bourgeoisie, putting into practice bold reforms in the organization of production and of the State (State Capitalism, totalitarianism, etc.), has delivered a shattering and disorienting blow, sowing doubt and confusion, not against the theoretical and critical foundations of Marxism, which remain intact and unaffected, but rather against the capacity of the proletarian vanguards to apply those Marxist principles precisely in the interpretation of the current stage of bourgeois development.

In such conditions of theoretical disorientation, is the labor of restoring Marxism against opportunist distortions merely a theoretical task?

No, it is the substantial and committed active struggle against the class enemy.

Ostentatious activism seeks to make the wheels of history turn with Waltz steps, swinging its derriere to the electoral symphony.

It is an infantile disorder of communism, but it spreads marvelously even in the sanitarium of politics, where the retirees of the workers movement go to die.

Requiescant in pace ... and then as if by magic they mobilize like an armored division, as soon as they are sent to conquer the factory nuclei of our groups – to count our members you really do not need an electronic calculator – and they claim, making you laugh, that these chickens and ducks, the imperialist blocs, are identical in weight, form and color, they are of equal strength, and with this sophistry they exhaust their very fluid analysis of the situation, which they deny that anyone else is capable of undertaking; and they finally give in to the deadly temptation that the easy chairs of parliament or some government ministry exercise over their sorry old behinds...

All the activist psalms end in electoral glory. Back in 1917, we saw the sordid conclusion of the super-activism of social democracy: after decades of activity entirely devoted to the conquest of parliamentary seats, of mixed trade union commissions, and of political influence, that had bathed them in an aura of unstoppable activism.

When the time came for the armed insurrection against capitalism, however, it was seen that the only party to engage in that insurrection was the party that had the least experience “working among the masses” during the years of preparation, the one that more than any other had worked to preserve Marxist theory. It was then seen that those who possessed a solid theoretical training marched against the class enemy, while those who had a “glorious” patrimony of struggles shamefully choked on their own words and went over to the side of the enemy.

So we are familiar with the fanatics of activism. Compared to them, carnival barkers are gentlemen. That is why we maintain that there is only one way to avoid their contagion: the classic kick in the ass.