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The Impotence of the Revolutionary Group

Moss, Sam
1939

Published in *Living Marxism* No. 7. This text is taken from the Anarchist Library.

I.

The difference between the radical organizations and the broad masses appears as a difference of objectives. The former apparently seek to overthrow capitalism; the masses seek only to maintain their living standards within capitalism. The revolutionary groups agitate for the abolition of private property; the people, called the masses, either own bits of private property, or hope some day to own them. The communist-minded struggle for the eradication of the profit system; the masses, capitalist minded, speak of the bosses' right to a "fair profit." As long as a relatively large majority of the American working class maintain the living conditions to which they are accustomed, and have the leisure to follow their pursuits, such as baseball and movies, they are generally well content, and they are grateful to the system that makes these things possible. The radical, who opposes this system and thereby jeopardizes their position within it, is far more dangerous to them than the bosses who pay them, and they do not hesitate to make a martyr of him. As long as the system satisfies their basic needs in the accustomed manner, they are well satisfied with it and whatever evils they behold in society, they attribute to "unfair bosses," "bad administrators" or other individuals.

The small radical groups – "intellectuals" who have "raised themselves to the level of comprehending historical movements as a whole," and who trace the social ills to the system rather than to individuals – see beyond the objectives of the workers, and realize that the basic needs of the working class can not be satisfied for more than a temporary period under capitalism, and that every concession that Capital grants Labour serves only to postpone the death struggle between these adversaries. They therefore – at least in theory – strive continually to turn the struggle for immediate demands into a struggle against the system. But beside the realities of bread and butter which capitalism can still offer a majority of the workers, the radicals can submit only hopes and ideas, and the workers abandon their struggles the moment their demands are met.

The reason for the apparent difference of objectives between the revolutionary groups and the working class is easy to understand. The working class, concerned only with the needs of the moment and in general content with its social status, reflects the level of capitalist culture – a culture that is "for the enormous majority a mere training to act as a machine." The revolutionists, however, are so to speak deviations from the working class; they are the by-products of capitalism; they represent isolated cases of workers who, because of unique circumstances in their individual lives, have diverged from the usual course of development in that, though born of

wage slaves, they have acquired an intellectual interest, that has availed itself of the existing educational possibilities. Though of these, many have succeeded in rising into the petty-bourgeoisie, others, whose careers in this direction were blocked by circumstances have remained within the working class as intellectual workers. Dissatisfied with their social status as appendages to machines, they, unable to rise within the system, rise against it. Quite frequently cut off from association with their fellow workers on the job, who do not share their radical views, they unite with other rebellious intellectual workers and with other unsuccessful careerists of other strata of society, into organizations of changing society. If, in their struggle to liberate the masses from wage slavery, they seem to be acting from the noblest of motives, certainly it doesn't take much to see that when one suffers for another he has only identified that other's sorrow with his own. But whenever they have the chance to rise within the existing society they, with rare exceptions, do not hesitate to abandon their revolutionary objectives. And when they do so, they offer sincere and sound logic for their apostasy, for, "Does it require deep intuition to comprehend that man's ideas change with every change in his material existence?" Sports in the development of capitalism, the revolutionary organizations, small ineffectual, buzzing along the flanks of the broad masses, have done nothing to affect the course of history either for good or ill. Their occasional periods of activity can be explained only by their temporary or permanent forsaking of their revolutionary aims in order to unite with the workers immediate demands and then it was not their own revolutionary role that they played, but the conservative role of the working class. When the workers achieved their objectives, the radical groups lapsed again into impotence. Their role was always a supplementary, and never a deciding one.

II.

It is the writer's conviction that the day of the revolutionary party is over; the revolutionary groups under present conditions are tolerated, or rather ignored, only as long as they are impotent; that nothing is so symptomatic of their powerlessness as the fact that they are permitted to exist. We have often stated that the working class which will endure while capitalism lasts, and which cannot be obliterated under this system can alone wage a successful struggle against capitalism and that the initiative can not be taken out of its hands. We may add here after all the conservatism of the working class today, only reflects the still massive strength of capitalism, and that this material power cannot be cast out of existence by propaganda but by a material power greater than that of capital. Yet from time to time members of our own group take to task the group's inactivity. They declare that, isolated as we are from the class struggle as it is waged today, we are essentially mere study groups that will be completely out of touch with events when social upheavals do occur. They state that since the class struggle is omnipresent in capitalism it behoves us as a revolutionary organization to deepen the class war. But they do not suggest any specific course of action. The fact that all other radical organizations in the field, through striving to overcome their isolation are nonetheless insignificant Marxist sects like ourselves, does not convince our critics of the futility of any action that small groups can take.

The very general statement that the class war is ever-present and that we should deepen it, is made first of all in the assumption that the class struggle is a revolutionary struggle, but the fact is that the workers as a mass are conservative. It is assumed that the class war aims directly at the weakening of capitalism, but the fact is that, though it serves this ultimate purpose, it is directly aimed at the position of the workers within the society. Furthermore, the actual class struggle is not waged

through revolutionary organizations. It is waged in the factories and through the unions.

In America today it is being waged by such organizations as the A.F. Of L. and the C.I.O., and though here and there across the continent arise sporadic strikes that are outlawed by all the existing conservative organizations and that indicate the form the class war may take when all these organizations are completely emasculated by the State, these workers' movements are infrequent and isolated today. True, the leadership of both the C.I.O. and the A.F. of L. is conservative, but then so is the membership of both unions. In order to retain their membership and attract more workers to it, the unions must wrest concessions from the capitalist class for them; the workers remain in the unions only because they obtain such concessions through them; and to the extent that they do obtain such concessions for the workers, the unions are waging the class struggle. If, therefore, we are to plunge into the class struggle, we must go where the struggle is being waged. We must concentrate on either factories or the unions or both. If we do so, we must abandon, at least overly, our revolutionary principles, for if we give them expression, we shall swiftly be discharged from the job and expelled from the union, and, in a word, cut off from the class struggle and returned precipitantly to our former impotent state. To become active in the class struggle means, then to become as conservative as the large body of workers. In other words, as soon as we enter the class struggle we can contribute nothing special to it. The only alternative to this course is to continue as we are, clinging impotently to our principles. Regardless of which course we pursue, it is obvious that we cannot affect the course of events. Our impotence illustrates what should be obvious to all: that history is made by the broad masses alone.

The Groups of Council Communists distinguish themselves from all the other revolutionary groups in that they do not consider themselves vanguards of the workers, nor leaders of the workers, but as being one with the workers' movement. But this difference between our organization and others is only an ideological difference, and reflects no corresponding material difference. In practice we are actually like all the other groups. Like them, we function outside the spheres of production, where the class struggle is fought; like them, we are isolated from the large mass of workers. We differ only in ideology from all the other groups, but then it is only in ideology on which all the other groups differ. Practically there is no difference between all groups. And if we were to follow the suggestion of our critics and "deepen the class struggle," our "Leninistic" character would become quite evident. Let us for assume, for example, that it is possible for us as an independent group to organize the workers of some industrial area. The fact that they have not moved of their own accord without our aid means that they are dependent upon us for their initiative. By supplying the initiative, we are taking it out of their hands. If they discover that we are capable of giving them the initial impulse, they will depend on us for the subsequent impulses, and we shall soon find ourselves leading them step by step. Thus, they who advocate that we "intensify" the class war are not merely ignoring the objective conditions that make such an act questionable, but are advocating also our leadership over the masses. Of course, they may argue that, realizing the evils of such a course, we can guard against them. But this argument is again on an ideological level. Practically, we shall be compelled to adjust ourselves to circumstances. Thus it becomes obvious that by such a practice we would function like a Leninist group, and could at best produce only the results of Leninism. However, the impotence of the existing Leninist groups shows the improbability of the success of even such a course, and points once more to the obsolescence of small revolutionary groups in regards to real proletarian needs, a condition perhaps forecasting the approaching day when it shall

be objectively impossible for any small group to assume leadership of the masses only to be forced in the end to exploit them to its own needs. The working class alone can wage the revolutionary struggle even as it is today waging alone the non-revolutionary struggle, and the reason that the rebellious class conscious workers band into groups outside the spheres of the real class struggle is only that there is as yet no revolutionary movement within them. Their existence as groups, therefore, reflects, not a situation for revolution, but rather a non-revolutionary situation. When the revolution does come, their numbers will he submerged within it, not as functioning organizations, but as individual workers.

But though no practical differences between us and other revolutionary organizations is permitted by the objective conditions, we can at least maintain our ideological difference. Therefore, where all groups see revolution in the most impossible situations and believe that all that is lacking for revolution is a group with the "correct Marxist line"; where, in a word, they exaggerate the importance of ideas, and incidently of themselves as carriers of those ideas – an attitude that reflects their careerist proclivities – we wish to see the truth of each situation. We see that the class struggle is today still conservative; that society is characterized not simply by this single struggle but by a multiplicity of struggles, which varies with the multiplicity of strata within the system, and which so far has affected the struggle between Capital and Labour in the interest of the former.

But because we see not merely the immediate situation but also the trends therein, we realize that the difficulties of capitalism are progressively increasing and that the means of satisfying even the immediate wants of the working class are continuously diminishing. We recognize that as a concomitant of the increasing non-profitability of capitalism, is the progressive levelling out of the divisions within the two classes, as capitalists expropriate capitalists in the upper class, and, in the lower class, as the means of subsistence, the better to extend them, is apportioned more and more uniformly among the masses, for the sake of averting the social catastrophe attendant upon the inability to satisfy them. As these developments are taking place, the divided objectives of the upper class are converging toward one objective; the preservation of the capitalist exploitative system; and the divided objectives of the workers are, despite the increasing ideological confusion, converging toward one objective: a fundamental change of present socio-economic forms of life. Then will we, only another strata of the working class now, or more correctly an offshoot, really merge with the entire working class as our objectives merge with theirs and we shall lose ourselves in the revolutionary struggle.

But this question may be raised, why, then, realizing the futility of the act, do you band together into groups? The answer is simply that the act serves a personal need. It is inevitable that men sharing a common feeling of rebellion against a society that lives by exploitation and war should seek out their own kind in society, and in whatever weapons fall to their command. Unable to rebel against the system with the rest of the population, they will oppose it alone. The fact that they engage in such action however futile it may appear establishes the basis for the prediction that when the large masses, reacting to the compulsives of the objectively revolutionary situation, feel similarly affected, they too will band together out of the same urgency and they too will use whatever weapons fall to their disposal. When they do so, they will not rise from ideological factors, but from necessity, and their ideologies will only reflect the necessities then, as do their current bourgeois ideologies reflect the necessity today.

The view of the revolutionary ineffectiveness of small groups is accounted a pessimistic one by revolutionary organizations. What if this view does indicate the inevitability of revolution? What if it does point to the objective end of a pre-established leadership of the masses, and to the end of all exploitation? The radical groups are not happy with this picture. They derive no pleasure from the prospect of a future where they have no more significance than their fellow human beings, and they condemn a view of such a future as a philosophy of defeatism. But, actually we have spoken only of the futility of small radical groups; we have been quite optimistic as to the future of the workers. But to all radical organizations, if their groups are defeated, and if their groups are dying, then all is dying. In such pronouncements therefore they reveal the true motivation for their rebellion and the true character of their organizations. We, however, should find no cause for despair in the impotence of these groups. Rather we should behold in it reason for optimism regarding the future of the workers. For in this very atrophy of all groups that would lead the masses out of capitalism into another society we are seeing for the first time in history the objective end to all political leadership and to the division of society into economic and political categories.