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On the Communist Party

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I

During the world war small groups in all countries arose, convinced that out of this ordeal of capitalism, a proletarian revolution must ensue, and they were ready to prepare for it. They once more took the name of communists, forgotten since the old times of Marx in 1848, to identify themselves from the old socialist parties. The Bolshevik party, then having its center in Switzerland, was one of them. After the war had ceased, they united into communist parties standing for the proletarian revolution, in opposition to the socialist parties who supported the war politics of the capitalist government; and represented the submissive, fearful tendencies in the working class. The communist parties gathered all the young fighting spirit in its ranks.

Contrary to the theory that not in a ruined but only in a prosperous capitalistic country the workers could build up a true commonwealth, the communists put forth the truth that it was the very ruin of capitalist production which made a revolution necessary and would incite the working class to fight for revolution with all its energy.

Opposing the social-democratic view, that a parliament chosen by general suffrage was a fair representation of society and the basis of socialism, the communists put forth the new truth, stated by Marx and Engels, that the working class, to attain its aims, had to take power entirely in its own hands, and had to set up its own dictatorship, excluding the capitalist class from any share in the government.

In opposition to parliamentarism, they put forth, following the Russian example, the soviets or worker's councils.

In the defeated Germany, November 1918, a vigorous communist movement sprang up and united the Spartacus group and other groups which had secretly grown up during the war. It was crushed the following January by the counter revolutionary forces of the socialist government. This prevented the rise of an independent, strong communist power in Germany, animated by the spirit of a highly developed modern proletariat, therefore the communist party of Russia entirely dominated the young rising communist groups of the world. They united in the Third International, which was directed from Moscow. Now Russia remained the only center of world revolution; the interests of the Russian state directed the communist workers all over the world. The ideas of Russian Bolshevism dominated the communist parties in the capitalist countries.

Russia was attacked by the capitalist governments of Europe and America. In defense, Russia attacked these governments by inciting the working class to rebellion, by calling them to world revolution – a communist revolution, not in the future, but as soon as possible. And if they could not be won for communism, then at least for opposition to the policy of their governments. Hence the communist groups were forced to go into parliament and to go into trade unions, to drive them as an opposing force against their capitalist governments.

World revolution was the great battle cry. Everywhere in the world, in Europe, Asia, America, among the oppressed classes and the oppressed peoples, the call was heard and workers arose. They were animated by the Russian example, feeling that now thru the war, capitalism was shaken from its foundations, that it was weakened still more by the economic disorders and crisis. They were just small minorities, but the masses of the workers stood waiting, looking with sympathy towards Russia, hesitating still because their leaders said that the Russians were a backward people and because the capitalist papers spoke of atrocities and predicted an inevitable and rapid breakdown. These very infamies of the capitalist press, however, showed how much the example was hated and feared.

Was a communist revolution possible? Could the working class conquer power and defeat capitalism in England, France and America? Certainly not. It had not the strength that was needed. Perhaps in Germany only.

What ought to have been done then? The communist revolution, the victory of the working class, is not a matter of a few years; it is a whole period of rising and fighting. This crisis of capitalism could only be the starting point for this period. The task of the communist party was to build up the power of the working class in this period step by step. This perhaps is a long way, but there is no other.

The Russian Bolshevik leaders did not understand world revolution in this way. They meant it to come immediately, in the near future. That which had happened in Russia, why could it not happen in other countries? The workers there had only to follow the example of their Russian comrades. In Russia, a firmly organized party of some ten thousands of revolutionists, by means of a working class of hardly a million, within the population of a hundred millions, had conquered power, and afterwards by the right platform it stood for and by defending their interests, it won the masses to its side.

In the some way the rest of the world communist parties comprising the most eager class conscious, able and energetic minorities of the working class, led by capable leaders, could conduct political power if only the mass of the workers would follow them. Were not the capitalist governments ruling minorities also?

The whole of the working class which now suffers from this minority rule has only to back the Communist Party to vote for it [sic], to its call, and the party will do the real work. It is the vanguard, it attacks, it defeats the capitalist government and replaces it, and when in power it will carry thru communism, just as in Russia.

And the dictatorship of the working class? It is embodied in the dictatorship of the Communist Party, just as in Russia.

Do as we did! This was the advice, the call, the directive given by the Bolshevik party to the Communist Parties of the world. It was based upon the idea of equality of Russian conditions with the conditions in capitalist countries. The conditions, however, were so widely different that hardly any resemblance could be seen. Russia stood on the threshold of capitalism, at the beginning of industrialism. The great capitalist countries stood at the close of industrial capitalism. Hence the goals were entirely different. Russia had to be raised from primitive barbarism to the high level of productivity reached in America and Europe. This could only be done by a party, governing the people, organizing state capitalism. America and Europe with their high level of capitalist productivity have to transform themselves to communist production. This can only be done by the common effort of the working class in its entirety.

The working class in Russia was a small minority and nearly the whole population consisted of primitive peasants. In England, Germany, France and America nearly half or even more than half of the population consisted of proletarians, wage workers. In Russia there was a very small, insignificant capitalist class without much power or influence. In England, Germany, France, America a capitalist class more powerful than the world had ever seen, dominated society, dominated the whole world.

The Communist Party leaders, by proclaiming that they (the party) should be able to beat the capitalist class, showed by this very assertion that they did not see the real power of this class. By setting Russia as the example to be followed, not only in heroism and fighting spirit, but also in methods and aims, they betrayed their inability to see the difference between the Russian Czarist rule and the capitalist rule in Europe and America.

The capitalist class with its complete domination of the economic forces, with its money power, its intellectual power, does not allow a minority group to vanquish and destroy it. No party, though led by the ablest leaders, can defeat it. There is only one power strong enough to vanquish this mighty class. This power is the working class.

The essential basis of capitalist power is its economic power. No political laws issued from above can seriously affect it. It can only be attained by another economic power, by the opposing class, striking at its very roots. It is the entirety of the workers who have to come into the field, if capitalism is to be overthrown.

At first sight this appeal to the whole of the working class may appear illusionary. The masses, the majority, are not clearly class conscious; they are ignorant as to social development; they are indifferent to the revolution. They are more egotistic for personal interests than for solidarity for class interests, submissive and fearful, seeking futile pleasures. Is there much difference between such an indifferent mass and a population as in Russia? Can anything be expected from such a people rather than from that class conscious, eager, energetic, self-sacrificing, clear minded communist minority?

This, however, is only relevant if it should be a question of a revolution of tomorrow, as conceived by the communist party.

For the real proletarian revolution, not the superficial chance character of today, is essential, which is determined by the present surrounding capitalist world. The real communist revolution depends on the deeper essential class nature of the proletariat.

The working class of Europe and America have qualities in itself that enable it to rise with a great force. They are descendants of a middle class of artisans and farmers who for many centuries have worked their own soil or their own shop as free people. They therefore acquired skill and independence, capability and a strong individuality to act for themselves, persistent industry and the habit of personal energy in work. These qualities the modern workers have inherited from their ancestors. Dominated thereafter during one or more generations by capitalism, they were trained by the machine to regular intensity and discipline in collective work. And after the first depression there grew in them, during continual fighting, the new rising virtue of solidarity and class unity.

On these foundations the future greatness of the revolutionary class will be built up. In Europe and in America there are hundreds of millions of people who possess these qualities. The fact that as yet they still stand before their task, that they have not yet finished it, that they hardly made a beginning, does not mean that they are not able to perform it. None other than their own power can tell them how to act; they have to find their way themselves by hard suffering and bitter experience. They have brains and they have hearts to find out and to do it and build up that class unity out of which the new mankind will arise.

They are not a neutral indifferent mass that does not count when a revolutionary minority tries to overthrow the ruling capitalist minority. As long as they do not actively take part, the revolution cannot be won; but When they do take part, they are not the people to be led in obedience by a party.

Certainly a party in its ascendance consists of the class' [sic] best elements, exceeding the mass as a whole. Its leaders usually are the prominent forces in the party, embodying the great aims in their names, admired, hated, honored. They stand at the front and when a great fight is lost, its great leaders are destroyed, the party is crushed. Knowing this, the secondary leaders, or the party officials, will often shrink from the supreme fight, from the boldest aims. The working class itself can be defeated, but it can never be crushed. Its forces are indomitable; its roots are in the firm earth; as growing green turf, the blooming tops which are mown always come up anew. The workers can temporarily desist from fighting when weakened, but their forces increase continually. A party that follows them in their retreat cannot recover, it must lose its character and repudiate its principles; it is lost forever. A party, a group, leaders, have limited force which is entirely spent, is sacrificed in honor, or in dishonor in the events of the class struggle; the class itself draws upon an unlimited store.

Prominent leaders can show the way, parties in their principles and platforms can express the ideas, the aims of the class only temporary. At first the class follows them, but then it has to pass them up, putting up bolder aims, higher ideas, conforming to the widening and deepening of the class struggle. The party tries to keep the class at its former lower level, at its more moderate aims, and has to be discarded. The doctrine that a party stands above the class, that it should remain the leader always, being theoretically false, in practice means strangling the class and leading it to its defeat.

We will show how in the communist party this doctrine after its first glorious ascendance led to rapid decay.

II

These are the principles leading the communist party and determining its practice: the party has to win dictatorship, to conquer power, to make revolution, and by this to liberate the workers; the workers have to follow, to back the party and to bring it to power.

Hence its direct aim is: to win the masses of the workers as adherents, to bring them to its side; not to make them good independent fighters, able to find and to force their own way.

Parliamentary action is one of the means. Though the C.P. declared that parliamentarism was useless for the revolution, still it went into parliament; this was called ‘revolutionary parliamentarism’, to demonstrate in parliament the uselessness of parliamentarianism. In reality it was a means to get votes and voters, followers of the party. It served to detract the worker’s votes from the socialist party. Numerous workers who were disillusioned by the capitalist policy of social-democracy, who wished to stand for revolution, were won over by the big talk and the furious criticisms of the C.P. against capitalism. Now this policy opened a new way for them, to stick to their old belief that by voting only and following leaders, this time better leaders, they would be liberated. These famous revolutionists, who in Russia had founded the State of the workers, told them this easy way was the right way.

Another means was trade unionism. Though the C.P. declared the unions useless for the revolution, yet the communists had to become members of them in order to win the unions for communism. This did not mean the making of the union members into clearly class conscious revolutionists; it meant the replacing of the “corrupt” old leaders by Communist Party men. It meant the Party controlling the ruling class machine of the unions, that it might command the big armies of union members. Of course the old leaders were not willing to give way; they simply excluded the red opposition groups. Then new “red” unions were formed.

Strikes are the schools for communism. When the workers are on strike, fighting the capitalist class face to face, then they learn the real power of capitalism, they see all its forces directed against them. But then they realize more fully the necessary force of solidarity, the necessity for unity. They are more keen to understand, and their spirit is eager to learn. What they learn is the most important lesson, and that is that communism is the only salvation.

The Communist Party varied this truth according to its principles in each strike that it was present to take part, or rightly to take the lead. The direction must be taken out of the hands of the trade union leaders, who do not have the right fighting spirit. The workers should lead themselves. The reason for this statement was because the working class, as you know, is represented by the C.P., therefore the Party should lead them. Each success was used to advertise the Party. Instead of the communist education, which is a natural outcome of each big fight in capitalism, came the artificial aim: to increase the influence of the party on the masses.

Instead of the natural lesson, that communism is the salvation, came the artificial lesson that the communist party is the saviour. By its revolutionary talk, they caught and absorbed all the eager fighting spirit of the strikers, but diverted it to its own aims. Quarrels which were injurious to the workers’ cause were often the result.

A continual fight was made against the social democratic party to detract its followers from it by criticism or its politics. Their leaders were denounced and were called by the most spicy names as accomplices of capital and traitors of the working class. Doubtlessly, a serious, critical exposition showing that social democracy had left the way of class struggle will open the eyes of many workers. But now, all at once, the scene changed and an alliance was offered to these ‘traitors’ for a common fight against capitalism. This was called solemnly “the unity or the working class restored”. In reality it would have been nothing but the temporary collaboration of two competing groups of leaders, both trying to keep or win obedient followers.

To win followers and votes, it is not necessary to call upon the working class alone. All the poor classes living miserably under capitalism will hail the new and better masters who promise them freedom. So they did as the socialist party did; the communist party addressed its propaganda to all who suffer.

Russia gave the example, The Bolshevik Party, though a worker's party, had won power only by their alliance with the peasants. When, once in power, they were threatened by the capitalist tendencies in the wealthy peasants, they called upon the poor peasants as the allies of the workers. Then the C.P. in America and Europe always imitating Russian slogans directed their appeals to the workers and the poor peasants also. It forgot that in highly developed countries of capitalism there lives in the poor peasants the strong spirit of private ownership the same as in the big farmers, if they could be won over by promises they would be but unreliable allies ready to desert at the first contrariety.

The working class in its revolution can only rely upon its own force. Other poor classes of society will often join them, but they cannot give additional weight of importance because the strong innate force which proletarian solidarity and mastership over production gives to the working class is lacking in them. Therefore, even in rebellion, they are uncertain and fickle. What can be aimed at is that they will not be tools in the capitalists' hands. This cannot be obtained by promises. Promises and platforms count with parties, but classes are directed by deeper feelings and passions founded on interests. They can be reached only when their respect and their confidence is aroused because they see that the workers bravely and energetically attack the capitalist class.

The matter is different for a communist party wishing to win power for itself. All the poor who suffer under capitalism are equally as good as followers of the party. Their despair, seeing no sure way out by their own force, makes them the right adherents to a party that says it liberates them. They are apt to break out in explosions but not to climb in continuous fight. In the heavy world crisis of these last few years the increasing masses of the regularly unemployed, in which the need and the idea of a rapid immediate world revolution became dominant, also turned to the communist party. Especially by means of this army, the C.P. hoped to conquer political supremacy for itself.

The communist party did not try to increase the power of the working class. It did not educate its adherents to clearness, to wisdom, to unity of all workers. It educated them into enthusiastic but blind, hence fanatical, believers and followers; into obedient subjects of the party in power. Its aim was not to make the working class strong, but to make the party powerful. Because its fundamental ideas originated from primitive Russian, not from highly developed capitalistic European and American conditions.

When a party wishes to win followers with all means and cannot attract them by arousing their interest in revolution, then it will try to win them by appealing to their reactionary prejudices. The strongest feeling which capitalism awakes and raises with all its might against revolution is nationalism. When in 1923 French troops occupied the Rhineland and everywhere in Germany the waves of nationalism went high, the C.P. also played the nationalistic game trying to compete with the capitalistic parties. In the Reichstag it proposed a companionship of the communist armed forces, the "red guards", with the German capitalist army (Reichswehr). Here international politics played a part. Russia, at that time hostile to the western victorious governments, tried to make an alliance with Germany, hence the German communist party had to make friends with its own capitalist government.

This was the chief character of all the communist parties affiliated to the Third International; they were directed by Moscow by the Russian communist leaders, so they were the tools of Russian foreign policies. Russia was 'all the workers fatherland', the center of communist world revolution. The interest of Russia should be the prominent interest of the communist workers all over the world. It was clearly stated by the Russian leaders that when a capitalist government should be the ally of Russia against other powers, the workers in that country had to stand by their government. They had to fight their government, in other countries. The class struggle between the capitalist and the workers class had to be made subordinate to the temporary needs and fortunes of Russian foreign politics.

Its dependence on Russia, materially and spiritually, is at the root of all the weakness of the communist party. All the ambiguities in the Russian development are reflected in the position of the C.P. The Russian leaders have to tell their subjects that their state-capitalistic building-up of industrialism is the building-up of communism. Hence each new factory or electric power plant is hailed in the communist papers as a triumph of communism. In order to encourage the minds of the Russians in perseverance, they were told by their papers that capitalist was nearly succumbing to a world revolution and envious of Russia, meditated to make war with Russia. This was repeated in the communist papers all over the world, while at the same time Russia was concluding commercial treaties with these capitalist governments. When Russia made alliances with some capitalist states and took part in their diplomatic quarrels, the communist papers glorified this as a capitulation of the capitalist world before communism. The papers continually advertised Russian ‘communism’ before the workers of the world.

Russia is the great example; hence the Russian example has to be imitated in the communist party. Just as in Russia, the party has to dominate the class. In the Russian party the leaders dominate because they have all the power factors in their hands. In the same way the C.P. leaders dominate. The members have to show ‘discipline’. Moscow, the “comintern” (Central Committee of the Third International) are the highest leaders; at their command the leaders in every country are dismissed and replaced by others.

It is natural that in the other countries there are doubts that arise among the workers and members as to the rightness of these Russian methods. But such opposition was always beaten down and excluded from the party. No independent judgment was allowed; obedience was demanded.

After the revolution the Russians had built up a “red army” to defend their freedom against the attacks of the “white armies”. In the same way the German C.P. formed a “red guard”, bodies of armed young communists, to fight against the armed nationalists.

It was not simply a workers army against capitalism, but also a weapon against all the adversaries of the C.P; Wherever oppositions arose at meetings and other workers criticised the party politics, the red guards at the command of their leaders were to deal with them, with maltreatment. Not opening their brains, but breaking their skulls was the method employed against criticising fellow-workers. Thus young and eager fighters were educated into rowdies instead of educating them to become real communists. When the national revolution came, when national violence proved too far stronger and more irresistible than communist violence, numerous young workers who had learned nothing but to beat their leaders’ adversaries, at once changed their colors and became just as zealous nationalists as they were before zealous communists.

Thru the glory that radiated from the Russian revolution, thru its own gallant talk, the C.P. assembled year by year all the ardent enthusiastic young workers under its colors. These young workers were used either in idle sham fights or spilt into useless party politics; all these valuable qualities were lost to the revolution. The best of them, disillusioned, turned their back on the party and tried to find new ground in founding separate groups.

Looking backward, we see the world war, as a culmination of capitalist oppression, arouse the revolutionary spirit of the workers everywhere. Barbarous Russia, as the weakest of the governments, fell at the first stroke, and as a bright meteor the Russian revolution rose and shone over the earth. It was another revolution, than the workers needed. Its dazzling light, first filling them with hope and force, blinded them, so that they did not see their own way. Now they have to recover and to turn their eyes towards the dawn of their own revolution.

The communist party cannot recover. Russia is making its peace with the capitalist nations and taking its place among them with its own economic system. The communist party inseparably linked to Russia is doomed to live on sham fighting. Opposition groups split off ascribing the decay to false tactics of some particular leaders, to diversify from the right principles. In vain; the basis of the downfall lies in the principles themselves.