

The Social Role of Fascism

By Wm. Z. Foster

WHEN the struggle between the working class and the capitalist class reaches the intensity of a final fight for power, which accompanies the breakdown of the capitalist system such as we are witnessing today in Central Europe, there arises a new social phenomenon, the Fascist movement. Fascism is the illegal violence of the anti-labor forces against the working class, carried in an organized form onto the scale of a mass movement. Arising out of the historical situation presented in Europe, the period of collapse of the old system, it spreads throughout the capitalist world. Even in America, where the capitalist system is still strong and unchallenged by any mass movement of the workers, Fascism is showing its head, notably in the Ku Klux Klan movement. As the most immediate menace to the labor movement, the Fascists present a problem that Labor must study and understand, if it is to be combatted successfully. The understanding of Fascism, what it signifies to Labor, and how it can be combatted, is best begun by a thorough study of the history of Fascism in its most classic example, the black-shirted troops of Mussolini in Italy.

What Happened in Italy

In Italy a great wave of social discontent developed during the war and the period immediately following. This took on a strong anti-capitalistic tendency. There was a wide-spread feeling and belief that the capitalist system had outlived its usefulness and that it had to be superseded by a new order of society. In this situation of almost universal discontent the organized labor movement, because of its definite program and structure, was able to take the lead. It impressed its proletarian conception upon the whole movement and convinced the broad masses that the new and expected reorganized system of society should and must be established under the leadership of and control by the working class. The organized workers were able to direct and

impress their conception upon the growing upheaval. They were the undisputed leaders of the discontented masses.

The workers' leadership stretched far beyond the limits of the industrial proletariat. The peasant masses were deeply influenced by the workers' program and were prepared to try it out. The middle class also had become convinced of the inevitability of the revolution and, to a great degree, had resigned themselves to it even if they had not become convinced of its desirability. Even the capitalists themselves were paralyzed by the scope and intensity of the movement, and were unable to break the nightmare of fear which clutched them. The Government stood aside and watched the waves of revolution mount higher and higher, but it could not act—its will was broken by the almost universal conviction that the working class was soon to take over the powers and reshape society. The army was crippled by the same overwhelming idea, and was an impotent instrument. We may obtain some slight conception of the situation by comparing it with that obtaining in Great Britain today, where all classes of society are convinced that the Labor Party will form the Government in the near future; the difference between the British situation and that in Italy after the close of the war being that the former presents only a minor crisis in British life and the change expected is only a change of Government, while in Italy the whole nation looked for a profound social reorganization. The Italian workers were sweeping on from victory to victory and practically all Italy expected them to establish a workers' society in the immediate future.

The Workers Lose the Lead

The great movement reached its crisis in the Fall of 1920, in the metal workers' strike which culminated in the occupation of the factories by the workers. More than a half-million metal workers seized practically all the metal factories

in the country, and began to operate them without capitalist superintendence. Workers in other industries began to follow the stirring example, and workers' councils sprang up everywhere. The peasants fell into line with the seizure of the land, inaugurating a profound agrarian revolt in support of the workers' movement. The expectant masses were convinced that the long-looked-for revolution was beginning. The Government was demoralized and powerless, and the whole capitalist class was in dismay. The stage was set and the actors ready for the Italian proletarian revolution.

In this critical moment the whole revolutionary movement was steered into collapse and disaster by the men at the head of the workers' parties and labor unions. These yellow leaders were men whose entire training had been in the peaceful era of reformism and compromise with capitalism. They were constitutionally incapable of dealing a death-blow to the capitalist system. Despite their revolutionary phrases which had infused the masses with hope, they backed away from the actual fact of revolution when they faced it. They settled the revolutionary strike of the metal workers on the basis of an ordinary trade union action, and thus practically cut the head off the surging anti-capitalist movement.

This betrayal of the revolution by the reformist labor leaders had a shattering effect. It destroyed at one blow the faith of the masses in the workers' program and movement. It seemed that the very concept of the proletarian revolution itself had failed. Almost immediately the air of expectancy of a workers' society was dissipated amongst all classes. Even the workers themselves became disheartened and discouraged, and largely lost faith in their own cause. They had builded their hopes upon false leaders and now paid the price of their folly. The great effect of the debacle was that the organized proletariat lost the leadership of the discontented masses, who were disillusioned by the ignominious failure of the profound revolutionary movement.

The Capitalists Regain the Lead

A central fact in the situation was that, although the workers' revolution failed, the widespread discontent which had given it such great volume and intensity still existed and had to find expression somehow. The capitalists, who had been roused from their lethargy by the collapse of the metal workers' strike, were able to turn to their own advantage the far-reaching discontent which had been balked of its revolutionary aim. They seized control of the masses, which they had temporarily lost to the organized workers in the revolutionary upheaval, and set out

to re-establish and strengthen the capitalism against which the workers' yellow leaders had not dared to throw the mass movement. The instrument through which the capitalists carried out their counter-revolutionary movement was a new one, which brushed aside the democratic trappings of capitalism. It was the Fascist movement.

In the popular mind in this country the striking feature of Fascism was the violence by which it came to power in Italy. But the real significance of the movement lies in its program. Fascism found a whole new set of objectives against which to throw the prevailing discontent. For one thing it inculcated an intense nationalism on the basis that it was due to the machinations of foreign powers against Italy that the latter was kept poor and oppressed. Also it turned the fury of the people against the Jews, upon the supposition that this race typified the international bankers who were the Italian people's enemies. But above all it attacked all branches of the labor movement, which it blamed for the high cost of living, the oppressive taxes, the shattered condition of industry, and almost every other social evil.

It was easy for the Fascist leaders to convince the great middle class and peasantry that the organized workers were deeply at fault, because, in the sharpness of the class struggle, the warring capitalists and workers had reduced production and profit to a minimum. So long as the workers had retained the initiative and had kept the masses' mind fastened upon the proletarian revolutionary program, they could blame all this industrial disorganization upon the capitalist. But when they lost the initiative through their yellow leaders' treachery, the capitalists were able to blame the chaotic situation upon them. The capitalists made their conception prevail that the cause of the social disorganization and discontent was the 8-hour day, the high wages, the many strikes, and the low productive efficiency of the industrial workers, which they attributed to the labor organizations. Then they could and did enlist great numbers of the middle class and peasantry in a most violent campaign, the Fascist movement, to smash the offending workers' organizations and to drastically reduce the toilers' standards of living. They prepared the way for a reorganization of industry on an efficiency basis at the expense of the workers. They made the most heroic efforts thus to pump life into the dying capitalist system.

The Disintegration of Fascism

In a word, the Italian situation, in its broad outlines, was that before the metal workers' strike of 1920 the organized working class was able to use the prevailing social discontent for revolu-

tionary aims; but, after that strike, because of the disillusionment it brought, the capitalists could and did use the same discontent for their counter-revolutionary purpose of revivifying capitalism at the expense of the workers' standards of living. The workers did not destroy the capitalist system, so the confused masses considered it logical enough to patch up that system which they believed the workers could not or would not abolish.

Although Fascism achieved power because it succeeded in rallying the discontented middle class and peasantry, yet it has had nothing substantial to offer them for their support. The Fascist program presents a mass of contradictions, just as our own Ku Klux Klan does in this country. Finding its mass base in the disaffected middle and agrarian classes, its every practical step and its every policy has, nevertheless, been in the interests of big business. In fact, the re-establishment of capitalism at the cost of all other classes and particularly of the working class, is the basis of Fascism. All of its promises to the discontented masses have been unfulfilled; the burdens of taxation have not been lightened, prices have not been lowered, currency has not been stabilized, increased production when achieved has benefited only the larger capitalists, the looting of the public treasuries has been carried out on a larger scale,

and in every way the middle classes and peasantry have been given a thorough course in disillusionment of Fascism. The inevitable process of disintegration within the Fascist movement must go on.

For the working class the world-wide Fascist movement provides many lessons. One of these is the total inability of reformist leaders, who are always weak and futile, to conduct the labor movement successfully through revolutionary crises. There must be real fighters at the head of the movement with a program to carry the working class on to new stages of the class struggle when confronted with a revolutionary situation. Another lesson is that the working class must retain the initiative, and establish and maintain its leadership over all of the oppressed masses. It must impress its program and its goal upon the minds of the lower middle class and farmers, as the only substantial hope for the solution of their problems, and thus establish such sympathetic contact and alliances with these classes that their support or neutrality in the revolutionary struggle is secured. They must be intellectually disarmed so that they cannot be used for Fascist ends. If these two lessons can be driven home to the labor movement everywhere, then the terrible scourge of Fascism now afflicting the working class of the world will not have been in vain.