

How the Communists Fight in Defense of Bourgeois-Democratic Rights

By A. B. MAGIL

ARTICLE II.

In addition to the war question, Norman Thomas is also disturbed by the stand of the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International on the question of fascism and bourgeois democracy. Here, too, his fears and perplexity are due to a complete misunderstanding of the Comintern's position, a failure to grasp the revolutionary essence of the new tactical proposals.

"Well-informed Socialists," Thomas writes in the Socialist Call of Aug. 3, "can never take part in a united front based on mere acceptance, sincere or insincere, of bourgeois democracy that has failed so many times as a weapon against Fascism."

In the Socialist Call of Aug. 10 Thomas admits his own confusion regarding what the character and program of the anti-fascist movement should be and gives as evidence of the "extreme opportunism" of the Communists the fact that they "offer more to war veterans than old line politicians!" Since when has it become opportunistic for a workers' party to offer more to the masses than do capitalist politicians?

The Fight for Democratic Rights

First, the united front is not based on "mere acceptance" of bourgeois democracy. It is based on the fight to defend bourgeois democratic rights and all the im-

mediate interests of the toilers. Those rights were not given to the masses on a silver platter. They were won through the armed struggle against feudalism and through sharp battles against the capitalists throughout the whole period since the downfall of feudalism. One of the most important of these bourgeois democratic rights, universal suffrage was not won in most countries, including our own, till after the bourgeois revolution. (For the Negroes in the South this is still largely a fictitious right.) The right to organize was not given to the American workers by the N. R. A. It was won in countless battles dating from the early years of the last century, and it is a right that has to be constantly defended

against the efforts of the capitalists to take it away.

It is these rights, genuine rights of the people, that have been destroyed in the countries of fascism and are being threatened by the advancing fascist reaction in every bourgeois democratic country.

Is This a New Fight?

Is it true, as the capitalist and Socialist press claim, that the Communists have just "discovered" these bourgeois democratic rights, and that in the past they carried on no fight for them?

This is completely untrue. Communists, from Marx and Engels to Lenin and Stalin, have always valued democratic rights as important weapons in the struggle against capitalism.

"Social Democrats (read Communists)," wrote Lenin in 1906, "regard parliamentarism (the election of representatives to public bodies) as a means of educating, training and organizing the proletariat in an independent class party, as one of the weapons of the political struggle for the emancipation of the workers."

The main resolution of the 11th Plenum (full session) of the Executive Committee of the Communist International in April, 1931, declared it one of the main tasks of all Communist Parties to fight "for the liberty of revolutionary workers' organizations (the only ones that were being threatened at that time—A.B.M.), free press, free speech,

right of assembly, for the immediate dissolution of fascist organizations, for disarming the latter and the arming of the workers for defense against fascist attacks."

The Fight for Negro Rights

In the United States there is hardly a city in which there is a Communist Party where struggle in defense of free speech and assemblage—bourgeois democratic rights—have not been fought, not only in the last two years, but throughout the whole Coolidge-Hoover period. The fight for Negro rights—again bourgeois democratic rights—is one of the most important parts of the Communist program.

What the Communists have op-

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How the Communists Defend Bourgeois-Democratic Rights

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posed and will continue to oppose is the vulgarization of the defense of democratic rights by the right-wing Social-Democratic leaders; the renunciation in practice of the fight for Socialism and the exaltation of democratic rights as the sum and substance of all that the workers need, and of bourgeois democracy as the "peaceful transition to Socialism."

This brings us to the whole question of the relation between bourgeois democracy and fascism.

Fascism and Bourgeois Democracy

Both bourgeois democracy and fascism are forms of the dictatorship of the capitalists and therefore, as the Communists have always insisted, there can be no opposition in principle between them. (The term "bourgeois democracy" is here used to describe not merely democratic rights, but the entire political system of capitalist parliamentary rule.)

Furthermore, fascism develops in the womb of bourgeois democracy. That is, the capitalists in the period of the general crisis of capitalism, when their class rule is threatened by the growing struggles of the masses, utilize the form of bourgeois democracy in an effort to destroy its essence.

Perhaps the clearest example of this is furnished by Austria. There the bourgeois democrat, Dollfuss, whom the Social-Democrats supported on the plea that he would prevent fascism, developed into the fascist dictator, Dollfuss. In Germany, too, Hitler took power "legally" and still continues to rule nominally under the Weimar Constitution, which was considered the most democratic of all bourgeois constitutions. And there, too, Hindenburg, whom the Socialist leaders supported as the defender of democracy, turned over the reins of government to Hitler and himself continued as president of the fascist Third Reich.

Socialist Anti-Democracy

The dominant sections of the capitalist class have, in fact, everywhere in the epoch of imperialism and especially since the war been increasingly anti-democratic—enemies of real bourgeois democracy. In the period after the war, the leaders of the Socialist Parties also became infected with these anti-democratic tendencies, and wherever they gained power, carried through the capitalist offensive on bourgeois democratic rights. In Germany the man who first ruled by emergency decree was not Bruening, but the Social-Democrat, Ebert. Incidentally, Ebert, first Socialist president, traveled so far on the road of betrayal that he even opposed the abolition of the monarchy (this fact is related by Ebert's colleague, the former Socialist chancellor, Philip Scheidemann, in his autobiography, *Memoirs of a Social-Democrat*; the same charge was made by the well-known Menshevik, R. Abramovitch, in a recent article in the *Jewish Daily Forward*).

Throughout the whole period of the Weimar Republic, while the Social-Democratic leaders disarmed the workers, both physically and ideologically, and lulled them to sleep with hymns of praise for bourgeois democracy, the defenders of the remnants of real bourgeois democracy were—the Communists. When a Social-Democratic police chief, Zoergiebel, denied the workers their historic bourgeois democratic right to demonstrate on the streets of Berlin on May Day—something which not even the Kaiser's police chiefs had dared to do—it was the Communist Party which called on the workers to defend this right even against the bullets of Zoergiebel's police.

The Barricades of Berlin

The heroic Berlin workers who fought on the barricades on May Day, 1929, were fighting not for the overthrow of capitalism, but for the defense of — bourgeois democracy!

While defending democratic rights, the Communist Party of Germany at the same time sought to free the masses from the illusions cultivated by the Socialist leaders that in bourgeois democracy lay salvation and that the bourgeois democratic political system was a bulwark against fascism. The tragic history of Germany from Bruening to Hitler has shown the correctness of this position and has vindicated the Communist charge that Social-Democracy paved the way for fascism.

Pieck's Statement Not New

It is evident from the foregoing that Communists have always made a distinction between bourgeois democracy and fascism, while showing the organic relation between these two forms of capitalist rule. And by their struggles in defense of democratic rights throughout the whole period since the war Communists have demonstrated that they are NOT indifferent as to which form of rule the capitalists employ. It is not true, therefore, that Wilhelm Pieck, reporting for the Executive Committee of the Communist International at the Seventh World Congress, turned all past Communist tactics upside down when he declared:

"It is not immaterial to us what political system rules this or that country. Where parliamentarism and remnants of democratic freedom exist, there, in spite of the capitalist interference, where it is possible for open fighting organizations of the proletariat to exist, there we defend parliamentarism and democracy against fascism and continue to struggle for the proletarian dictatorship."

The tactical conclusions to be drawn from this statement in the present period of the sharpened offensive of fascism, especially in view of the new developments in the Socialist Parties, do, however, involve certain changes — changes not of principle, but of tactics—that it is important to understand. These will be discussed in the final article tomorrow.