

An Un-Leninist Analysis of Imperialism

By Bertram D. Wolfe

(Critique of Gomez's Article, "Labor and Empire," in the July Workers Monthly.)

THE article, "Labor and Empire," written by Manuel Gomez in the Anti-Imperialist (July, 1925) Number of the WORKERS MONTHLY, purports to contain a theoretical analysis of the historic background of imperialism, its economics and its political implications for the working class of the imperialist nations, and for the exploited or subject peoples. The article in question is replete with errors of un-Marxian and un-Leninist nature; in fact, all of its basic theoretical propositions are partly or wholly incorrect.

This is all the graver because the magazine in which it appears is a Communist (and hence Marxist-Leninist) organ; because its author is the secretary of the American section of the All-America Anti-Imperialist League and, as such, his words carry more weight and responsibility than would those of an individual of lesser official importance or activity; and finally, because it is the only article that seeks to make a general analysis of the theoretical basis of imperialism in the anti-imperialist number of a would-be Marxist-Leninist organ and therefore its errors cannot be left uncorrected. Nor would a mere "correct" analysis in the August issue, without reference to the article of Gomez, be adequate, as that would leave undisturbed the errors already absorbed in the minds of many readers. Moreover, that is not the way that a Communist organ corrects the errors committed in one of its articles.

So much by way of explanation. Now to an analysis of the more important errors, not in the order of their importance, but rather in the order of their statement in the article. "Historic Background of Imperialism."

Under this heading the article begins with the remarkable statement: "American workers might have already thrown off the whole system of wage slavery if it were not for the appearance of imperialism." Such speculations are un-Marxist and futile. Marx showed that capitalism leads thru accumulation to concentration and centralization of capital. This leads inevitably to monopoly capitalism, which is the primary economic basis of imperialism. Thus Comrade Gomez's "if" partakes of scholastic medieval speculation and not of Marxism. Moreover, there is no justification for the conclusion, even allowing the premises. Countries that have not developed monopolistic finance capitalism are "backward countries." On what ground does Comrade Gomez assume that non-imperialist backward countries imply a victory of the proletariat? Moreover, America, more than any other advanced country, still has, or has had until recently, an expanding home market—but to go further would be to lose one's self in the very maze of scholastic speculation that Comrade Gomez's "if" hypothesis implies.

"The Peaceful Period of Capitalism."

This is Leninist phraseology, but Comrade Gomez gets his dates, or rather, his periods, mixed. The "peaceful period of capitalism" in the United States Gomez dates from 1894 to the world war. This, he adds, is an international phenomenon. In another part of the article he even speaks of the "peaceful period of imperialism (!)"

The truth of this "historical" matter is that the peaceful period of capitalism ends precisely where imperialism begins. By the "peaceful" period is meant that period roughly included in the second and third quarters of the nineteenth century when the first wars for capitalist unity were generally at an end (the so-called national wars) and when capitalism was based on the production of consumption commodities as its typical industry, and when liberalism, "free trade" and Jeremy Bentham prevailed in economic practice and political theory in the most advanced countries. The classic land of the peaceful free trade, free competition and non-state-intervention

period was England. The classic industry textiles. The climax of this period is roughly from 1840 to 1880.

It was a peaceful period because the "struggle for markets" with textile products as the typical export, does not require spheres of influence, colonies, the intervention of states and armies, etc., but merely quantity production, cheapness and good salesmanship. To sell red flannel underwear to equatorial savages, it is not necessary to own the country, to bribe its government, to subsidize a revolution or to pry a colony loose from its mother country by war. A German firm can sell red flannel underwear to naked savages in Madagascar (French colony) if it sends missionaries to convince them of the iniquity of going naked, sends cheaper, brighter-colored underwear and good patient salesmen willing to learn the language and the peculiarities of the natives. As long as free competition continues and "light" or consumption industries such as textiles continue to be the basic ones, there is no great need of colonies, spheres of influence, etc.

"Colonies," says the imperialistically-minded Disraeli in 1852, "are just millstones around our necks." From 1840 to 1860 and even later bourgeois politicians of the liberal school were in the saddle and opposed any colonial aggressiveness on the part of England itself, the characteristic colonizing country.

But the last quarter of the nineteenth century is characterized by the change from "light" to "heavy" basic industries—that is to say, from textiles to metallurgy. Also monopoly begins and finally the export of capital itself.

The export of metal products implies the export of capital. It also implies colonies, spheres of influence, control of the governments of backward nations, subsidized revolutions and colonial wars.

A typical form of exported "metal product" is a railway. A railway cannot be sold to an equatorial savage by a salesman and a missionary. It can only be "sold" to a backward country thru political influence or control of that country's government. A railroad, to begin with, runs at a financial loss on the basis of its net returns, above all in a country backward industrially. To make it profitable, the government of the backward country must (1) grant a concession of the right of way (2) an exclusive monopoly to that right of way, eliminating parallel lines as a possibility; and (3) subsidize the venture with land or money grants or grants of natural resources. Finally, it is superfluous to point out that the exporting of the "metal product" called a railway implies the export (investment) of capital as well.

Thus begins the scramble for concessions and spheres of influence, for colonies and protectorates, for governments "friendly to foreigners" and governments friendly exclusively to American or British or German or French capital, and all the other sources of imperialist wars and onslaughts of imperialist nations on backward ones and on each other.

This, the warlike period of capitalism, is the imperialist period, and begins with the beginning of monopoly capitalism, and export of capital. In other words, the warlike period of capitalism, in the Leninist sense, begins when Gomez says the peaceful period of capitalism begins. Any one who fails to take into account this fundamental difference between the textiles and metallurgy, between the export of underwear and the export of metals and dollars, cannot grasp the first essentials of imperialism and the imperialist epoch.

Moreover, it is a contamination with bourgeois pacifist "Hague conference" illusions on the one hand, and with the psychology instilled by imperialist apologists on the other, to believe that the period preceding 1914 (roughly from 1890 to 1914) was a peaceful period. The Hague conferences were only the plaster on the ulcer. The armament race was on, the world war was brooding. It almost broke out in 1905 and again in 1911.

And the so-called "minor" wars, as imperialist apologists would call them, do they count for nothing because they were waged against black and yellow men and not between whites? Naturally, the weak nations were attacked first, but robber imperialism is no less warlike because its victories were easier. Germany, in 1885, seized German East Africa, in 1897 German Southwest Africa, New Guinea, Kamerun and Samoa. In 1899, Kaiu-Chau.

France in 1885 occupied the Congo, in 1895 appropriated Madagascar, in 1904 Morocco (cause of the crisis of 1905 which was of world-war magnitude), in 1913 Syria. America in the same period took Hawaii, while Japan seized Formosa.

If that is not enough evidence of a warlike period for Gomez (and it might be multiplied) how about the Spanish-American war of 1898 for Cuba, Porto Rico, the Philippines and the control of the Caribbean? How about the English-Boer war? The Boxer war of the combined powers against China? The Russo-Japanese war for spheres of influence in Manchuria, Korea and China? The Italo-Turkish war for the possession of Tripoli in 1912? The Algerian Crisis, etc.?

The period of imperialism is the warlike period of capitalism. A failure to grasp this makes the world war a phenomenon without precedent causes, and makes the wars against yellow and brown and black-skinned races no wars at all (or "peaceful" wars). In other words, it is an unconscious reflection of pacifist illusion and imperialist apologetics.

Gomez, in his "historical background" takes the strikes of 1870 to 1894 in the United States as an evidence that up till 1894 there was a warlike period and after 1894 a peaceful period. This, of course, has nothing to do with Leninist analysis of imperialism although Lenin is dragged in and quoted. The strike epidemic in question was due to the world commercial crisis of the period. The relative "class peace" period that followed 1894 (very relative indeed) was caused by the expansion due to monopoly growth and other factors, and was broken by repeated strike crises of great magnitude. But, I repeat, it is not this kind of "peace" to which the Lenin quotation on "peaceful period" refers.

The Gomez confusion in the article goes so far as to say that "It (the peaceful period when strikes lessened in scope, number and intensity), was purchased at the expense of the backward and undeveloped countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America, thru the policy of imperialism." (!) But enough of the "historic background."

"Superprofits."

The second part of the article deals with the economic basis of capitalism, under the heading of "Superprofits." Here the errors are even graver and in much more elementary things. Marxian economics is turned inside out and upside down.

By "super-profits" Gomez means profits in excess of the average rate of profit. He points out that imperialism yields such excess profits or "super-profits."

This is essentially correct, and very important. The understanding of the economics of this profit in excess of the average rate, that is yielded by imperialism, is the understanding of the economics of the exploitation of the oppressed peoples. This makes it all the more unfortunate that Gomez's analysis is incomplete, incorrect and anti-Marxian.

The first source of "super-profit" according to Gomez "results from THE GREATLY INCREASED RATE OF EXPLOITATION AS REFLECTED IN THE COMPOSITION OF THE CAPITAL EMPLOYED, WHICH, IN BACKWARD COUNTRIES, SHOWS A MUCH GREATER PROPORTION OF VARIABLE CAPITAL TO CONSTANT." (Emphasis mine.)

This is, of course, economic nonsense. The rate of exploitation has nothing to do with the composition of capital, altho vulgar economy at times tries to calculate the rate of exploitation on the total capital invested. The

rate of exploitation is the proportion of the unpaid labor to the paid labor performed by a worker. The proportion of capital invested as constant or variable capital does not enter into its calculation.

The essence of imperialist exploitation is found in the use of a cheap and docile labor supply, a low living standard among the backward people, inhumanly long hours, inhumanly low wages, dispossessing of the backward peoples from the land, and forced labor. All of these, which form the essence of imperialist exploitation, make it the brutal thing it is and explain the revolt of China, Morocco, etc., from the imperialist yoke, are not mentioned in the four enumerated points. Some of the other points are incorrectly stated, and other important factors are omitted, but this article will be prolonged unduly if I analyze the economic section of Gomez's article any further.

"Workers, Subject Peoples and the Revolution."

Passing over other errors of a minor nature, I jump to the end of the article. The last section is called "Workers, Subject Peoples, and the Revolution." The questions here considered are of a tactical, political nature and therefore vital for the action and "practical conclusions" for a Bolshevik party. Again there is lamentable confusion and even a false tactical position.

Gomez discusses, citing Bukharin (in his battle with Boris—the aliteration is mine) and drawing on Lenin, the corruption that is engendered in the labor movement by imperialism which is able to bribe leaders and even whole sections of the "aristocracy of labor" with some part of the enormous profits, and thus win them to class collaboration and support of imperialism. This is correct, as is the position of Gomez that this corruption must be fought and an effort must be made to win away the "aristocracy" of labor from class collaboration. But the vagueness of the passage and the failure to draw a distinction between corrupted leaders and labor aristocracy leads to this lamentable sentence in which the two are unconsciously merged and illusions fostered on the possibility of winning the corrupted leadership. Here is the sentence:

"While we fight to win the masses away from the leadership of these corrupted elements, we must endeavor to break the LATTER away from the bosses and draw them more and more into the struggle. It is in unceasing struggle that the hope of the working class lies."

Of course, it is possible that Gomez meant to write "former" in place of "latter," but even if that is so, the correction must be made. Moreover, the passage in question sins terribly by omission as well as by what is stated. The masses must be broken away, not only nor directly from the bosses, but precisely from these corrupted leaders. This is a fundamental error in trade union policy—the omission of the necessity of struggle against this corrupted leadership. Lenin advocated it all his life, and precisely because he comprehended that they were bought by a share of imperialist profits and were objectively, to use a Deleonite phrase, quoted by Lenin, "labor lieutenants of the capitalist class." If Gomez actually meant what the words appear to say, the passage is even worse for it implies that the corrupted leaders as a class can be won to fight against the bosses, thus fostering an illusion in them. If we demand that they break with the bosses, it is not with the hope of winning them, but as a means of exposing them and annihilating them utterly.

Follows a return to the economic theory in the sentence: "By the export of capital, the capitalists have unwittingly helped to build up a native industry in the subject countries with its own. . . bourgeoisie. . ." This is of course, incorrect. The export of capital, neither wittingly nor

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unwittingly creates a native bourgeoisie. On the contrary, it tends to destroy it. Again Gomez is confusing the export of commodities with the export of capital. Again the economic error implies a grave political one. If the export of capital creates a native bourgeoisie, then such native bourgeoisie should welcome imperialism and its gifts. But the export of capital destroys the native bourgeoisie by competition, by absorption, by monopoly concessions and by use of force—precisely for this reason, the native bourgeoisie fights against imperialism and is a potential ally in the struggle for national liberation which gives the proletariat its allies in the struggle with finance-imperialist capitalism.

Who does not understand the economic fact in question will not understand the political corrolary expressed in the theses on imperialism of the Comintern and will not be able to utilize, as we must and can, the national bourgeois revolutionary movements as partial allies in the struggle against capitalist imperialism, the final stage of capitalism.