

STILL WANTED : THE MARXISM OF MARX

J. T. Murphy here replies to the various contributors who have discussed the subject raised by him in his original article in the April PLEBS.

I MUST congratulate the editor on putting so many letters together in the May issue. Taken altogether they present a pretty picture of the state of mind of a number of leading members of the Labour College and Plebs League movement. Although the Communist Party was not mentioned in my article, nor the questions either of the relations between the Communist Party and non-party organisations, or of what organisation should control workers' education, there is hardly a letter which does not deal with these questions and almost these alone.

For example Comrade Hamilton says "To this end the movement emphatically cannot work under any party label." Comrade Turner says, "To say to the student 'Thou shalt join the Communist Party,' will not prevent him making his own choice." Comrade Holder wags his head sagely, quotes poetry against the young, and says with an air of profundity, "It is not a discussion that can be undertaken by the Communist Party as a party." Whilst Comrade Silvester mournfully observes that the Communist Party is not "poised" correctly. I don't know whether Comrade Craik has trained these comrades in the Marxist "method of investigation" but they appear to be very apt at discovering in my article things that weren't there.

But as a real live exhibition to W. E. A.ers of the intelligent, logical "Marxian" method of discussion in our own ranks take still further samples. Comrade Redfern simply yelps across the pages, "Let us review our work. Let us.....let us.....let us..... Oh, I declare we are getting it across." Comrade Hamilton more quietly says this perennial question *has* been met,

"the curriculum *has* been revised"; and Comrade Millar says there is no trouble apart from the few critics who convince themselves that a "substantial minority of the workers know all about the class struggle and that all they need is a practical programme to rush the revolution into existence in about twelve months." So the Bad Bolshevik Bogy of the *Daily Mail* has got into the Labour College in the form of "the few critics." This exhibition of "Marxians" with the wind up when a discussion is afoot is really delightful! If only the weather was cooler one could laugh more heartily!

Two things are evident up to now. First, annoyance because someone has asked them to think things over a bit. Second, the prejudice of the craft-unionist in education against the new-comer in the form of the Communist Party. The first one can dismiss with a chuckle. The other shows quite clearly that there has been little consideration given to the role of a worker's revolutionary party in the class struggle. This applies not only to Plebs' League and Labour Colleges, but to all sections. The study of parties has been relegated to Party politics as if it were only a question as to which label one had to wear instead of a most serious question to the workers. Even if we accepted the opinion put forward by a number of Plebeians that the Colleges, etc., are preparatory schools for the parties, the least that ought to be done is to prepare the students to make a choice by a thorough study of working-class parties and the kind of party required to exercise efficient leadership in the class struggle. But this is not done and it is a most serious defect in the armoury of those who claim to be teaching the workers "how to wage the class struggle."

The Plebs and Labour College position was aptly described by Comrades E. and C. Paul, in the July PLEBS—"It is therefore (though by no means 'anarchistic' in trend) somewhat alien in sympathy from anything that calls itself a political party and operates (in part) on the parliamentary field."

This attitude is neither Marxian nor true to the interests of the workers. It leads to the notions expressed repeatedly in the letters directed against my article, of "one organisation, one job"—the party to emphasise, the classes to teach—just as if a political party striving for the leadership of the working class, or actually leading it, could leave out of its scope the question of working-class education and relegate it to an organisation of mixed political views. Such a course is inconceivable for a party based upon the class struggle. The I.L.P. learned this long ago, and set about winning the leadership of the Labour Party and Trades Unions. The syndicalist elements within the Labour Colleges and Plebs League dominate them, and it is these who resent the new competitor. The

advent of the Communist Party has roused the wrath of both sections. The I.L.P. are the most bitter opponents of the C.P. in the Labour Party, and the syndicalists and I.L.P. are the most bitter opponents in the Plebs and Labour College. They are fearful of a competitor for power and immediately proceed to misinterpret and misrepresent the policy of the C.P. under the plea of "neutrality."

The Communist Party does not seek to issue orders to the Plebs League or the Labour Colleges, saying do this or do that. Nor does the Party seek to do this to the unions. It seeks to win the membership of these organisations to its political faith and policy; by an ideological victory to secure an organic victory. That is why I do not support Comrades E. and C. Paul in their proposal to the Communist International. The immaturity and youthfulness of many of our parties makes it imperative that these get to grips with Marxism.

In this immediate task, which of necessity must stress the importance of the role of the Party, we are faced with the fact that many of our Party members have been trained in the Plebs and Labour Colleges, and are expressing the notions exemplified in this correspondence—essentially anti-party notions. Instead of the Plebs and Labour Colleges having been a preparatory school for a Marxian party we are finding that some of the stiffest opposition to the development of the Party comes from them in the name of Marxism. Because of this fact I wrote my article, to shift the discussion entirely from that of a wrangle between two organisations to that of a discussion of Marxist education. I knew full well that it would be bound to bring out the theoretical conceptions which are the background of the Labour College and Plebs movement. This it has done, but not in a very creditable fashion. It has shown clearly, although I did not raise the question, that a non-Marxian conception as to the role of the Party has considerable support.

But more. May I repeat a little of what I wrote in April:—

The extent to which events themselves have shattered the main tenets which we held prior to the Russian revolution indicates the nature of the change which the movement is undergoing . . . [We used to think that] the most advanced countries will be the first to make the revolution. This was the basis upon which the most revolutionary sections built their theories and they looked to America to lead the way. And the route—the ballot box plus industrial might. Those who were not parliamentarian in the reformist sense stressed industrial organisation and leaned towards the theory of the growth of workers' industrial organisations to such dimensions that this would emerge out of capitalism much as the butterfly emerges from the chrysalis.

Then I proceeded to say that the actualities of the revolutionary epoch had swept these notions away, and pleaded for a revaluation of our educational material.

But all that is forthcoming up to now, apart from the outburst of grievances against the Communist Party, is the reply of the custodian of Marxism in the Central Labour College. Comrade Craik puts out nonsense about "ready made roads to the revolution," and writes as follows:—"Murphy elevates to the dignity of a fundamental elementary fact that emancipation is impossible without the conquest of power. Such phrases are precisely the sort of 'abstraction' which as he himself says 'obscure the dynamics of the class struggle.'" Then Comrade Craik manifests his "concrete" wisdom about the road to an "abstraction"—"Education" he says "is concerned with the *road to power*."

Exactly. Then this fundamental fact will not obscure the road but illuminate it, and place the dynamics of the struggle in proper perspective. That is both Marxian wisdom and commonsense.

But having been too clever with the "concrete" and the "abstract" he makes some endeavour to get to grips with the revolution; listen—"There is still truth in the statement that the most advanced countries in capitalism have a leading part to play in the making of revolution. It is still true that a successful social revolution is intimately connected with a high stage of technical development. The Russian revolution has not shattered that main tenet."

Let us examine this statement, which falls into two parts. First, what is the leading part which the advanced countries are playing in the revolution? As a matter of plain fact, the advanced countries are playing the *leading reactionary* part in the revolutionary epoch and are likely to do so until their workers have conquered political power. (Or shall I say "conquered the fundamental abstraction?") Further, the workers have conquered power first in Russia and will most probably conquer power in America the last. The advanced countries are not therefore playing the leading role in the revolution, because the spread and development of revolution depend upon the spread of instability in capitalism. Its outworks fall before its principal forts. It is obvious, therefore, if our theories have been built on the opposite notion, as expounded by Craik, that there will be considerable need for revision.

Now to the second part of Craik's statement as to the relation of high technique to a successful social revolution. Who has ever disputed—certainly not the Communist International—that the development of technique is related to the revolution? But if Craik means to say that the capitalist class cannot be overthrown until every country has a high technique, then the Russian revolution flatly contradicts him. If he means, however, that to have a fully developed Communist Society, a necessary prerequisite is a high technique, then we are in agreement. But there is nothing in his

article to show that he does mean this. His remarks are made in a way to cast reflections upon the Communists for having upset his calculations and managed a revolution in Russia before it had gone through a full development of Western capitalism. Much as this may be annoying to one's theories, it is a fact which relegates the question of high technique to one of varying value in the political struggle of the classes. Its development produces a greater proletariat, and also strengthens the state power of the capitalist class in its resistance to the proletariat. It facilitates the solution of economic problems when the workers have taken power, but makes the job of getting power infinitely harder. Hence it is that the Western proletariat have a harder job than the Russians to capture power, and an easier economic task than the Russians when they have got it.

Our position was repeated very clearly by Comrade Trotsky at the Fourth Congress of the Communist International. He said:—

The possibilities of the upbuilding of socialist economic system, when the essential conquest of political power has been achieved, are limited by various factors; by the degree to which the productive forces have been developed; by the general cultural level of the proletariat; and by the political situation upon a national and upon an international scale. We have learned in the elementary school of Marxism that there is no possibility of making one leap from a capitalist society to a socialist one. Nor did any one of us believe that it would be possible with one leap to move into the realm of freedom. Not one of us ever believed that a new society could be built twixt night and morning.

Up to the conquest of political power by the proletariat and the successful suppression of the capitalist class questions of technique, type of working-class education, industrial struggles, must be related to and subordinate to political expediency. Had these things been fully realised by those claiming the name of Marxians in this country it would not have proved so difficult to build a Communist Party. Nor should we be finding it necessary to debate the relations which should exist between the Communist Party and such organisations as the Plebs Leaguers and Labour Colleges. The need for a thorough overhauling is clearer than ever, and I hope this discussion will continue.

J. T. MURPHY.

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