

Analysis and Lessons of the International Sacco and Vanzetti Campaign

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THE international protest against the infamous execution of Sacco and Vanzetti grew into a campaign of extraordinary world significance. For many years no campaign for international solidarity has grown to this gigantic extent.

The movement became really international in the literal sense of the word. It developed not only in the United States of America, but also in all the countries of Europe; embraced the whole territory of the Soviet Union, flooded Latin America—and reached even to Australia and to South Africa. Not only countries but whole continents were gripped by the movement.

The movement was of world significance also in its depth. Not only did it stir up the broadest strata of the proletariat, but it also took with it exceptionally broad sections of petty-bourgeoisie, intelligentsia, and even certain parts of the bourgeoisie.

The movement was of world significance in that it rose with an elementary spontaneity that showed clearly how, notwithstanding the stabilisation of capitalism, but coming from the very contradictions and antagonisms created in the process of this stabilisation, sudden events can disturb the whole capitalist world.

The movement was of world significance also because it did not stick at mere platonic protest resolutions, but culminated in tremendous mass actions. It grew from mass meetings into protest strikes, into great street demonstrations and General Strikes in some countries. Bloody clashes characterised its course not only in Boston and New York, but also in Paris, Leipzig, Geneva, Cherbourg and London. The Sacco-Vanzetti movement erected the first barricades seen on the streets of Paris since the days of the Commune. It gave into the hands of hundreds of thousands of workers in New York, for the first time, the weapon of the political strike. For the first time in many decades the masses of American workers became an integral part of an international proletarian movement. The best evidence of the revolutionary spirit of the masses are the hundreds of workers, black-listed, arrested, wounded and dead.

The International Movement

With respect to its international character, its geographical extent, its depth, its mass character, its spontaneity, and its strength in action, the Sacco-Vanzetti movement excels every other campaign for international solidarity of recent years. Neither the international acts of solidarity for the British miners' strike nor for the Chinese revolution were able to develop the same extent and spirit, although objectively they involved events of greater importance. A million workers were involved in the British miners' strike, and the outcome of the struggle had a direct effect upon the destiny of the mine-workers in other countries. The Chinese revolution, one of the most tremendous revolu-

tions in the history of the world, has an extraordinarily great bearing upon the whole future not only of other colonial countries, but also of the European proletariat. Compared with these tremendous world events, the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti was a much smaller affair, involving not millions of fighting masses but the fate of two individuals.

This inverse ratio between the objective importance of the events and the power and extent of the international movement to which they gave rise, compels careful consideration, and makes necessary an analysis of those factors which gave to the Sacco-Vanzetti movement a much greater international response than was met with by the British miners' strike or by the Chinese revolution.

A Class Analysis

We need a class analysis of the Sacco-Vanzetti campaign in order to find the explanation of this remarkable fact. Everywhere the chief protagonist of the campaign for the British miners' strike and for the Chinese revolution, was the *working class*, just as it constituted the chief driving force also of the Sacco-Vanzetti campaign. The following clear basic factors are before us:

1. *The general international situation* which, owing to the resentment latent everywhere among the masses, is inclined to give rise to outbreaks of mass passion and mass struggle on every important occasion.

2. *The leftward swing of broad strata of the working class* in a whole series of countries, upon the basis of which proletarian solidarity develops more and more strongly on a national as well as an international scale. The General Strike and the miners' strike in Britain, the July insurrection in Vienna, the tremendous mass demonstration of the Red Front Fighters League in Berlin, the new strike wave in Budapest are similar evidence of the leftward move of the toiling masses, as was the tremendous Sacco-Vanzetti campaign. When the leaders of the Russian Opposition argue to the contrary, and chatter about a move to the right of the international Labour movement, they turn reality upside down, and only prove that they are divorcing themselves at a constantly faster tempo not only from the toiling masses of the Soviet Union, but also from the international Labour movement.

3. *The growing influence of the Communist Parties*, which are more and more consciously and energetically taking into their hands the organising and leadership of demonstrations of international solidarity.

In the call for an extension of the Sacco-Vanzetti campaign all these factors played an extraordinarily important role—the fundamental role—but they alone can neither explain the extent nor the vigour of the campaign—since they were also functioning during the campaigns for the British miners' strike and for the Chinese revolution, to a less extent in these two campaigns, however, than in the Sacco-Vanzetti campaign.

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There is, therefore, the necessity of analysing also those other factors which were applicable to neither the British miners' strike nor to the Chinese revolution, but which played a great role in the Sacco-Vanzetti campaign. In advance, let us set forth here the difference between the international campaigns for the miners' strike and the Chinese revolution on the one hand, and the Sacco-Vanzetti campaign on the other. The first-mentioned campaigns appeared right from the start as proletarian campaigns. The Sacco-Vanzetti campaign, however, in its first phase bore a "general" character, in which there participated not only the proletariat but other classes—petty-bourgeoisie, intelligentsia and sections of the bourgeoisie. It was just this "general" character of the Sacco-Vanzetti campaign in its first phase which to a great extent contributed to its extension. But it must now be explained how it could happen that the Sacco-Vanzetti campaign—at least in its first phase—did not confine itself to the proletariat, but carried with it also large sections of the bourgeois world. It is surely something quite out of the ordinary for the bourgeois intelligentsia, and even the bourgeoisie, to participate in the defence of two common labourers, two unknown proletarians, who are in addition actually anarchists charged with robbery and murder, found guilty by all the legal authorities of the United States and condemned to death.

The "Humanitarian" Side of the Campaign

Let us try to enumerate the weightiest of those factors responsible for the participation of the non-proletarian elements in the Sacco-Vanzetti campaign. These factors are:

1. *The humanitarian, "mankind - in - general," "above-all-classes" character of the Sacco-Vanzetti affair.*—The Sacco-Vanzetti case did not appear on its face as a cause of the proletariat. They were not accused of a political crime at all. Their arrest had no connection with any sort of proletarian mass action, neither with a mass strike, nor with an uprising, i.e., with no event which clearly and openly menaced the maintenance of capitalist exploitation of bourgeois political rule. Sacco and Vanzetti were not Communists, but declared themselves to be anarchists. The menace of anarchism, moreover, has long since lost its importance for the bourgeoisie. Anarchism is no mass movement. The bourgeoisie to-day fears Communism—the ideology of the revolutionary masses of workers—a thousand times more than it ever feared anarchism. To be an anarchist is to-day a much smaller crime in the eyes of the petty-bourgeoisie than to be a Communist.

From the beginning it was quite clear that neither Sacco nor Vanzetti had anything whatever to do with the robbery-and-murder charge, that they were absolutely innocent, that all the evidence against them had simply been manufactured by the police. Not only every worker but also every petty-bourgeois had the feeling that to-morrow or the day after the police and the courts might proceed against him also with the same venal means.

Drama

The specially "dramatic" circumstances of the Sacco-Vanzetti affair had a very strong influence upon the imagination of the petty-bourgeoisie and of the intelligentsia. For nearly seven years the two men sat face to face with death. From month to month, from year to year, their execution was postponed with a juridical pedantry, a brutality of which only the American bourgeoisie is capable.

The circumstances also that Sacco and Vanzetti were to be executed "legally," with all the formalities of "legal" murder had a particularly aggravating effect. For dozens to fall in a street battle does not arouse as much sympathy among petty-bourgeois elements as does a single "legal" consciously-prepared execution.

Even the technique of the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, which to the non-American world was uncommon and extraordinary, played a big role in arousing petty-bourgeois sympathies. In the mind of the European masses the electric chair—the symbol of mechanised America—was looked upon as something abhorrent, accustomed as they are to the more "handicraft-like" methods of execution in Europe, viz., gallows or axe. The effect of the uncustomary method of execution was more and more aggravating and repulsive. It could be noted, e.g., that although the European and American petty-bourgeoisie received the execution of Chinese Communists with satisfaction and agreement, it was, nevertheless, offended at the "primitive barbarity" of the method of throttling with bare hands. The "technical progress" of the electric chair in America went just as strongly against the grain of the European petty-bourgeoisie as did the "technical backwardness" of the naked hands in China.

All these points which, in the last analysis, are related to the fact that the death sentence against Sacco and Vanzetti did not appear related to any important proletarian mass action, made it possible for broad strata of the petty-bourgeoisie and intelligentsia to look upon the Sacco-Vanzetti affair as a matter involving "humanity," and therefore to affiliate to the Sacco-Vanzetti campaign in its first phase. The participation of these strata in the campaign as a matter of course took on a pacifist character (the petty-bourgeoisie and bourgeois intelligentsia feel happiest when they can appear as representing no classes, but as speaking for "humanity," "mankind," etc.). It may even be noted that in certain strata of the proletariat, also where pacifist humanitarian illusions are still potent, these "dramatic" points played a big role.

American-European Enmity

2. *The antagonism between debtor Europe and creditor America.*—The growing indebtedness of the European countries to American imperialism increases not only Europe's dependence upon America, but also results in discontent and—even if for the time being still weak—signs of resentment on the part of Europe. Not only the petty-bourgeoisie and the intelligentsia but also certain parts of the bourgeoisie in many European countries are opposed to "Uncle Shylock," indignant at him for being so slow to advance his loans and so heavy in his demands for interest on his dollars.

Sacco and Vanzetti—continued

The Sacco-Vanzetti affair was exploited by the European bourgeoisie to give a bit of free rein to that discontent and rebellion against American finance capital which it dare not express openly. Especially in France, where, because of the war debts, bitterness is probably greatest against America, the indignation of the French bourgeoisie against the heartlessness of the American creditor became transformed into indignation against the heartless execution of Sacco and Vanzetti. The Sacco-Vanzetti campaign found a road to the "heart" of the European bourgeoisie through its safe deposits which are now menaced by America.

3. *The fiasco of the Geneva Disarmament Conference.*—The Anglo-American conflict was greatly intensified by the failure of the Geneva Conference for naval disarmaments. America exploited the collapse of the negotiations not only for an immediate increase in its naval armaments, but also for a venomous campaign against British imperialists, which it charged with responsibility for the failure of the conference and for the continuation of naval armaments. Then came the Sacco-Vanzetti campaign and British bourgeois public opinion—never at a loss when faced with an opportunity for a counter-attack—exploited the Sacco-Vanzetti affair in order to discredit the American bourgeoisie. The British bourgeoisie attempted to prove, to some extent, that the same America which was guilty of the inhuman destruction of Sacco and Vanzetti could not be innocent of the brutality of naval rivalry.

4. *Latin-American solidarity.*—Embitterment, hatred and indignation are of late rising to a truly obvious extent in the countries of Central and South America. The behaviour of American imperialism in Mexico, and especially its bloody intervention in Nicaragua, have made the American bourgeoisie the hated common enemy of all Latin-Americans. A direct resistance against the domination of American imperialism to-day would mean economic oppression and political destruction. The protest campaign against the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti thus became resistance against the American bourgeoisie in an indirect and thus less dangerous form. Sacco and Vanzetti were, as is known, Italians, and in their presentation in the whole Latin-American press they appear as the victims of Anglo-Saxon arrogance and brutality, as symbols to a certain degree of the struggle of Latin-American nationalism against the imperialism of the United States.

Reason of Petty Bourgeois Participation

All these factors—the "general humanitarian" character of the Sacco-Vanzetti affair, the antagonism of debtor Europe to creditor America, the Anglo-American rivalry, the resistance of Latin America against American imperialism—furnish the explanation of how it could happen that broad masses of petty-bourgeoisie and intelligentsia could participate in the first phase of the Sacco-Vanzetti campaign, and that certain sections of the bourgeoisie in the beginning looked with favour upon this campaign or at least were neutral. Thus it could happen that in the first phase of the Sacco-Vanzetti campaign hundreds upon hundreds of bourgeois newspapers came out against the execution of Sacco and

Vanzetti, thus the unusual situation could arise that the international bourgeoisie showed itself divided in its verdict upon the execution of two revolutionary workers, that a real breach had been made in the dam of capitalist solidarity, usually so high and broad and impenetrable on questions of class justice. Usually, when the life or death of imprisoned revolutionaries is involved, the bourgeoisie tries to present the representatives of the proletariat as bloodhounds who have deserved a thousand deaths, or else simply to smother the whole affair in silence in order to make impossible a wide campaign for the defence. In the Sacco-Vanzetti affair, however, the condemned were depicted in the most sentimental colours, the most touching scenes from their family life were painted in word and picture, and the whole affair was given an unprecedentedly extensive publicity without precedent. Usually the bourgeoisie utilises its monopoly of the means of influencing public opinion (press, telegraph agencies, radio service) against the victims of bourgeois class justice, or else it simply bans all news. In comparison with the bourgeois press, the proletarian newspapers are weak and small, they can reach only a relatively small section of the masses. Very often if the masses of workers remain immovable in vital concerns of the proletarian struggle this happens only because they are under the terrific pressure of bourgeois press and public opinion, or because, owing to the exclusion of news by the bourgeois news monopoly, they can learn little or nothing about the events.

The Common Cause of "Justice"

The sympathy of broad petty-bourgeois circles and the good wishes or neutrality of certain sections of the bourgeoisie therefore made it possible in the Sacco-Vanzetti campaign to arouse much broader strata of the workers to indignation and participation in the campaign than was the case in former international movements which from the beginning had to face the undivided resistance of the whole bourgeois world. This (besides the already-mentioned basic factors: the general international situation, the leftward swing of the toiling masses, the growth of the Communist Parties) is the explanation for the uncommon breadth and depth of the international Sacco-Vanzetti campaign.

This analysis is valid, however, only for the first phase of the Sacco-Vanzetti campaign. The second phase presents a fundamentally different picture. When the workers, gripped by hatred and bitterness, went into action with ever sharper means of mass action, strikes and demonstrations on behalf of the lives of their proletarian class comrades, the picture quickly changed. The bourgeoisie of all countries immediately relegated to the rear all its differences with the American bourgeoisie and openly and defiantly became one with the executioner bourgeoisie of the United States of America. The same German, French and British bourgeoisie which had so sentimentally published resolutions, editorials and telegrams against the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti immediately black-listed hundreds of striking workers and ordered the shooting down of the demonstrating masses with a brutality equal to that of their American prototypes. This same petty-bourgeois and capitalist who in the name of "humanity" had wailed

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so much against the extinction of two human lives now instantaneously killed and wounded dozens upon dozens of workers solely because they no longer fought only with resolutions, but with revolutionary actions for the rescue of the two workers doomed to execution.

On the basis of the above analysis the following lessons are to be drawn from the international Sacco-Vanzetti campaign :

(1) In the atmosphere of present-day sharp class conflict the bitterness of the proletarian masses may lead unexpectedly to spontaneous revolutionary outbreaks over any more important event. The Communist Parties must not be caught unprepared.

(2) Every important event in the proletarian class struggle during the present period show a tendency to become an international event.

(3) It is of special importance to analyse carefully every split within the bourgeois classes, and exploit it to the limit. We must endeavour to win over the broadest possible strata of petty-bourgeoisie, peasantry and intelligentsia for the proletarian objects of the working class, or, at least, to neutralise them. At the same time, however, we must from the beginning be

clear in our own minds that these petty-bourgeois allies or fellow-travellers will always remain uncertain allies, who at the first sharpening of the situation will desert and go over into the enemy camp.

(4) For the purpose of mobilising the broadest masses we must strengthen our work in such united front organisations as the International Red Aid (I.C.W.P.A.).

(5) The forms and nuances of the powerful pacifist sentiment which, as was shown also in the Sacco-Vanzetti campaign, still prevail in broad strata of the proletariat, must be painstakingly studied and fought on the basis of our experiences in these campaigns.

(6) The news monopoly of the bourgeoisie must be broken through just as far as this is possible in capitalist society by the extension of the independent Labour press and the independent proletarian news service.

(7) And finally, the most important : that only the Communist Party is the sole reliable organiser of the revolutionary mass action of the proletariat. Even the most elementary, most spontaneous mass movement cannot effectively fight the capitalists or defeat capitalism if it is not organised and led through the Communist Party. It was a great victory for the Communist International that, in Europe as well as in America, the Communist Parties were equal to their tasks in the Sacco-Vanzetti campaign, and decisively and unhesitatingly put themselves at the head of the mass movements.