

A CRITIQUE OF COMMUNIST TACTICS

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EVIDENTLY, some of the most important suggestions about revolutionary technique ought to be discoverable in the history of the Communist International. This body has been engaged over a period of fifteen years in an organized international attempt to secure revolution. It has had considerable funds, a revolutionary citadel from which to operate, devoted adherents, sometimes at least a chance of the allegiance of the masses outside Russia, and the assistance of men of high intelligence, including Lenin, to guide it. All its operations have been carried on in the last decade, so there is no question of out-moded methods and ancient examples.

The Third, or Communist, International was founded in Moscow in 1919. Conferences were held, at first, every year. Later they were spaced out more, and at the time of writing no full conference has met at all for two or three years. During the years 1920 and 1921 large masses of the workers, inspired by the Russian revolution, were in a mood to consider joining the Third International. Conditions—including the once famous Twenty-One Points—were put up which the existing organizations of the workers declined to accept. Among these was the famous public promise to undertake illegal work, a romantic demand which seemed less melodramatic in Moscow surrounded by Red Guards than it did in Prague or Paris.

These conditions afforded an admirable

opportunity for the war-time, anti-revolutionary leaders of the Labor movement to recover their lost prestige. The opportunity was taken and as a result of these three years of struggle, the mass of the workers did not, as was hoped, support the Communists, or form the necessary "mass-revolutionary" organizations. In every capitalist country almost without exception, there were in 1922 old-style trade-union movements in which the Communists had been deprived of all influence; the "red" trade-unions were relatively insignificant.

Politically, the working class was split into two parts. In most countries the Socialist Parties had an undeniable and marked superiority over the Third International parties; where this was not so, as in France, the ensuing years put the Socialist Party back into a commanding position. Large numbers of workers were continually throughout the next ten years attracted into the various Communist parties, but, in general, still larger numbers left them. The British Communist Party, for example, which started with 10,000 members, had in 1932 apparently rather less than half that number. (I say "apparently" because exact and reliable information about Communist parties is no longer given to the workers: estimates have to be used.) A very much larger number than 10,000 had passed through the Communist organization. "If the ex-members of the party," it was stated in

London in 1932, "were laid end-to-end, they would reach from here to Moscow."

The general line of development in the years 1922-1933 was, as is not denied by anyone, for Socialist (anti-revolutionary) organizations to recover their strength at the expense of the Communist or Communist-controlled bodies. One very considerable exception to this rule was to be observed. In Germany, after an initial recovery by the Social Democrats, they appeared to be losing ground steadily to the Communist Party, which seemed to be on the way to becoming the mass party of the German workers after all. This tendency was becoming more marked in 1933 when both parties were overwhelmed by the Nazis and further development stopped.

II

No successful revolution anywhere has been conducted by the Third International. Two short-lived revolutionary governments were formed in 1919, in Bavaria and Hungary. They came to sudden ends and were in any case not directed by the Third International, which was not then organized. In 1927 a joint revolutionary enterprise by the Communist International and the Chinese Nationalist Party, called the Kuo-min-tang, had spectacular successes immediately followed by a crushing defeat for the Communists when Chiang Kai-Shek, the Kuo-min-tang general, turned upon them. Since then a reputed Soviet movement, of which nothing is known, has appeared in the interior of China.

It remains true, therefore, that the record of the Third International is one of failure. It set out to achieve world revolution; it has not achieved any revolution at all anywhere. However much chagrin

this judgment may cause to earnest workers, it is impossible to sustain any other verdict. We can no longer inquire: "Has the Third International failed?," but only "Why has the Third International failed?"

The first mistake of the Communist International lay in its constitution. It is a centralized body. It is one international party, divided for administrative reasons into national units; not an international union of various national parties. All its members are controlled and directed (theoretically at least) by the Presidium in Moscow, which again is ultimately responsible only to an international conference, when that meets. The conference decides policy, but that policy is interpreted by the Presidium, whose instructions are binding on all members, including the executive bureaux and committees of the national parties. Individuals may be punished by the International, though that is of course rare; but the intention and effect of the international discipline is more to enforce all parties and all national executive bodies to follow exactly the lines laid down by the Presidium and to suppress at once any "deviations."

The argument for this form of organization is that because capital is internationally organized, labor to fight it must be organized internationally too. At first sight, this seems plausible, and is in a limited sense true. Labor movements with no international connections would be gravely hampered. But in general it is not true; it is only plausible. First of all, capital is *not* internationally organized. Only certain branches of capitalism are, and those very imperfectly. Furthermore, even in the world of capitalism international organization has in many important respects recently receded before increased nationalism. It is certainly still true that the greater number of the workers' strug-

gles, trade-unionists or political, have to be fought out nationally and not internationally.

Secondly, even were capital internationally organized, the deduction that labor must also be internationally organized in the Communist manner does not follow. So far from this strict and rigid discipline enabling the workers to fight their enemies, it excludes precisely those swift-minded and independent workers whose allegiance is necessary. In any revolutionary crisis international control is a ludicrous idea. Orthodox Communists should consider what would have happened in Russia from March to November, 1917, had Lenin and his colleagues been under the discipline of an International. As it was, they varied their tactics with the greatest speed. They demanded the calling of the Constituent Assembly as soon as possible and then closed it up when it came. They took charge of an insurrection in July, lost it, and tried again.

But all this time they considered themselves members of the International, or at the very least of the anti-war section of the International. How on earth could they ever have succeeded in their task if they had had to obey the orders of an International committee sitting outside Russia and consisting of, say, Eugene Debs, Branting, Turati, Merrheim, and Ramsay MacDonald—or whomever else you please?

That such a prospect could be entertained at all as a plan for a future revolution, by reasoning beings, only shows that its defenders are living in a dream-world, in which their International is such an organization as never could be, directed exclusively by new and younger Lenins, who add to his energy and intelligence a miraculous knowledge of conditions and problems everywhere in the world. Any

international revolutionary organization which may be built in the future must have powers of discipline, without question. It must retain the right to expel a party for counter-revolutionary activity (or inactivity) or aims.

But such a right must only be exercised by a conference, after fair inquiry, and it is wholly impracticable to think of directing national party activities, in any but the most general way, from an international centre. People who accept the task of leading a movement for social change in any one country must take the responsibility for their own decisions, and answer for them to those who have to carry them out and to suffer the consequences. If they will not, if they want a distant committee to advise and control them, be sure they are wholly unfitted for their positions.

III

Unwise in itself, this central authority was unwisely used. When the first Communist International Conference met in Moscow in 1919, there was no sort of uniformity to be seen among the bodies attending it, nor among those who were attracted to it and its satellite bodies in the next year or so. Their organizations had, often, great vitality and glorious traditions of their own; they were overshadowed but not crushed by the Russians. There were the Italian Socialist Party, the I.W.W., the Spartakusbund, and then the German Communist Labor Party (K.A.P.D.—practically a Blanquist party), the Norwegian Labor Party and others.

The Communist International deliberately set out to enforce uniformity upon them, as a considered policy. All their historic names were to be thrown over-

board—no title was to be allowed but “the Communist Party of —.” Political organization had to be exactly the same, based on the Russian, with Politburos and Agitprops, and all, regardless of whether the conditions called for them, and regardless, too, of the opinions of the local proletariat to whom these grotesque names were often either perplexing or the subject of disrespectful jokes. Political programs had to be identical; so had economic and political slogans, which meant naturally that they became so general as to be nearly devoid of meaning.

That this policy was right appeared to the Communists to be proved by the fact that the stronger organizations, which resisted it, came to bad ends. The K.A.P.D. passed out of existence. Mussolini massacred the Italian Socialist Party. The Norwegian Labor Party split. The I.W.W. withered up. The Communist International surveyed the ruins and, in manifestoes which unfortunately became far more verbose as time went on, pointed in effect the nursery moral: “This comes of not doing what you’re told.”

But that that was so is exceedingly improbable. At least as much blame may be laid upon the Third International for failing to accommodate its policy to the prejudices and traditions of working classes which had had different experiences from the Russians. It thereby had part responsibility for disasters like the Fascist revolt in Italy, in which, incidentally, its own “correct” organizations were annihilated as utterly as the “incorrect” ones. But this and other splits did not impress Mr. Zinovieff and his colleagues that way. They considered that they were entitled to assume, according to Marxist economics, that the capitalist crisis would grow worse and worse, and that more and more workers would consequently be

driven into the Communist ranks. They felt that they could ignore, or treat as paid agents of the bourgeoisie, all those national labor leaders who hesitated or bargained about conditions of admission to the International, or of “discipline” once they were inside.

Not less but more uniformity, not less but more ordering from the center was their remedy. The failures so far did not mean, they considered, that the medicine was bad, but that double doses should be taken. They felt that time worked fast and inexorably for them: they imagined the workers clamoring at their international gates, and like good showmen, raised the price of admission.

But economic development cheated them. The promised flood of workers into the Communist parties prepared for them never came. From about the end of 1923 to the middle of 1928 capitalism stabilized itself. The workers’ living conditions steadied, and sometimes even improved. So far from the revolutionary urge increasing it declined rapidly. The Communist International publications of those years angrily denied the fact, but events were too strong for it. The workers did not knock for admission at their doors: on the contrary, those who were inside began to leave. The International in disgust abandoned the *embourgeoisé* workers of Western Europe and America for the Far East, where misery was eternal.

IV

Nevertheless, under the influence of their visionary hopes, Mr. Zinovieff and his colleagues had made their final and most serious blunder. This was the adoption of the policy of “bolshevization” in 1923. It is impossible to understand this policy unless we remember that the Presidium

members had convinced themselves of the inevitability of a vast world-wide swing of the workers towards themselves. They believed, under this delusion, that they could regard the words "worker" and "Communist" as almost interchangeable: they could at least act as though all workers very soon would be either Communists or sympathizers.

They could not, indeed, deny that there were in fact some who were not, but they regarded them as ripe fruit about to fall. Outside the parties they saw not (as was the case) the majority of organized and conscious workers, but a small minority of deliberate traitors and a number of fooled and backward followers. The latter were to be quickly brought up, as a crammer brings up a class of morons, to the general level by the use of what were called "lower organs," meaning small journals, local meetings and leaflets. "It is the duty," the Third International instructed the British party, "of the lower organs of the party to penetrate the backward parts of the proletariat." Those who still remained doubtful were to be regarded as enemies of the workers and extirpated by all the devices—including conspiracy, untruthfulness and dishonesty—till then reserved for the capitalist class.

To enable this to be done, all party members were put under an exact control and personal discipline which was derived far more from Bakunin than Marx. Its name and historical justification was, however, taken from Lenin's famous conflict with Martov, which split the Russian Socialists before the war into Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. Martov wished to keep within the party members who merely accepted the party program and paid their subscriptions. Lenin, with a greater perception of the reality of political conditions in Czarist Russia, replied

that no man should be allowed to belong to the party who was not a worker for the party—who did not in ascertainable fact put himself at the orders of the executive, regularly and unceasingly and do reliably the work allotted, whether it was dangerous, or disgusting, or dull, or all three. There were to be no passengers, even if they offered money for their tickets. Lenin's plan was victorious, and Zinovieff transposed it to Western conditions twenty years later without realizing that the circumstances were very different.

Certain considerable successes were achieved by "bolshevization." Serious revolutionaries do not want to be passengers, and if only they could be assured that discipline would be applied equally and that their officials could be trusted, they were willing enough to take orders. Some at least of the membership that was squeezed out at first by "bolshevization" was in fact little more than water. Those who remained showed a sudden increase of energy. They stood in the rain to sell party papers, they came first and left last at open air meetings, they affronted the police, and interrupted rival labor meetings with the patience and obstreperousness of the early Quakers. For all their small numbers they were deep and sharp thorns in their rivals' sides.

But as "bolshevization" progressed, it began to do more harm than good. In the first place the new discipline became odious to the membership. It had been accepted by the pre-war Bolsheviks because the political conditions of Czarism enforced it. Under terrorism, such organization is necessary and the workers agree to it, but not otherwise. Perhaps it would be better if they did, but we have to deal with the imperfect material that human beings are. And in America and England,

despite the oppression that does exist, the workers are not in fact living under a Terror, though to this day the large majority of Russian Communists believe that they are.

Membership figures fell. Yet so far from slackening the discipline, the International intensified it. Cross-examinations concerning members' private lives and activities were first permitted, and then made compulsory. In Russia, a "party purge" exists, in which a member is required to expose to his fellow members his soul and his relations with other persons. Cases are known in which members have been compelled to quarrel with relatives of unsuitable views as a price of retaining membership. Such extremes were not reached in England and America, but long steps were made towards them. I have myself, as a member of the party, witnessed the cross-examination of a low paid and semi-skilled engineer as to the way in which he spent his private time. He was able to prove that on Saturday afternoon and on every evening but one he was occupied either blamelessly or on party work. "But what," said an accuser springing from the second row, "do you do on Wednesday night?"

Had he been a Russian, it may be that our engineer would have delightedly seized the opportunity to expound the perplexities of his sex-life and the troubles that attend a worker who doubts if he has the money to take a deviating young woman to the pictures. But being of another race, he turned purple and advised the audience loudly to find itself a less (but not much less) indecent occupation than nosing into his affairs. His suggestion was ruled out of order and within two days he had left the party and with him a number of his friends. All over the country, similar and little less foolish

scenes were occurring, and the reluctance of members to accept this inquisition was enhanced by a distrust of their officials as "yes-men" which began to appear about the same time.

V

As "bolshevization" proceeded, its ravages became more severe. Heresies were found with a facility and ingenuity that only the Early Church could rival. What are Brandlerism? Zinovieffism? Lovestonism? Loreism? What is a leftward deviation from the proletarian ideological norm? I doubt if even the most "bolshevized" "monolithic,"¹ "in-the-line" Leninist Communist could say offhand now; yet they are real heresies and numbers of people have been expelled for holding them. None of these terms have been invented by me. The parties continually peeled portions of themselves off and threw them away, as if they had turned into onions with suicidal mania. This "onion-process" is not a rare symptom among revolutionary parties, from the Jacobins onwards, but any student of revolution recognizes it as a disquieting sign of grave disease.

The process of argument which identified "worker" with "Communist" also identified "non-Communist" with "class-enemy." The method to be used against all class enemies under "bolshevization" was that of secret conspiracy. But in Britain and the United States at least, it lamentably failed because of the impossibility of preserving secrecy. So many of the Communist workers failed to realize that their lifetime friends were now

¹ "Monolithic" is a word of praise coveted by orthodox Communists. It is not, as an etymologist might think, Russian for "bonehead." It means "member of a party without any divisions of opinion in it."

treacherous enemies, and "spilt the beans" from mere naïveté, while those that did were often too clumsy to conceal their manœuvres.

At one meeting of the London Trades Council, of which the late Duncan Carmichael was secretary, a number of "spontaneous resolutions of revolt" were moved by delegates apparently from all over London. Their common complexion roused Mr. Carmichael's curiosity and he asked for the resolutions to be handed to him in writing. Each spontaneous delegate then presented him with a thin slip of typed paper, typed by the same machine, and when the slips were laid together their irregularities exactly fitted and they formed one foolscap sheet of paper.

This method of work was known as nucleus work—"nucleiing" was the term preferred by the then organizer. Its operation may be studied perhaps best in an organization like the then Labour Research Department, which the Communists desired to capture from the existing staff. The method was to arrange speakers and resolutions on committees beforehand, without the other workers knowing, in order that they might be swept away by what appeared to be a spontaneous outburst of energy but was in fact a secretly rehearsed piece of acting.

The first problem in this particular case was to pack the necessary sub-committees so that all the more important publications should be handed over to Communists; the second so to thwart the secretary, G. D. H. Cole, that he would be vexed into resigning. A "nucleus meeting" was called in November, 1923, prior to the meetings of the Finance and General Purposes and Publications Committees, and the following mysterious orders as to behavior were sent out to those absent from or present at the meeting. They

are actors' parts, with cues; the initials represent other actors in the know. The orders appear on the next page.

Such tactics could only be successful if the Communists' rivals had been in fact idiots led by scoundrels. But they were not: they were mischievous beasts who defended themselves. They fought back: and as it was the more left-wing bodies which the Communists tried to control, it was precisely their nearest allies which they found themselves attacking. I vainly endeavored to prevent the British Communist Party from following this policy, urging it to consider that it was digging a deep ditch between itself and its closest fellow workers; and on my advice being rejected, I withdrew from the Communist Party. Nothing that has occurred since has caused me to change my mind.

VI

With the adoption of this policy the party finally ceased to be a possible instrument of revolution. It filled the minds of the most energetic and independent workers with hatred and distrust of the Communists. It gave them as enemies not men like J. H. Thomas, Ramsay MacDonald, or John Lewis, who might reasonably be considered to have abandoned their original tenets altogether and to have gone over to the other side, and whose enmity might perhaps be considered a compliment. It embroiled them with precisely the patient and courageous rank and file workers who kept alive locals and branches in the face of capitalist persecution in industrial towns and mining villages, and who were most liable to find their organizations and themselves "captured" by a "revolutionary cell."

It made even some strong revolutionaries regard the name Communist as the

261.

Decisions of meeting on 14/11/23 calling
for action at F. & G. P. Com. on 16/11/23
or Publications Com. on 20/11/23.

Decision.

Co-options to E.C.

MHD.

OEB.

MEB

CPD

Co-option to P.C.

Labour & Capital Sub-C'ee. Move re-
appointment of RPA, EB, MEB, RPA

Syllabus sub-c'ee. Move appointment of
RPA, OEB, CPD, RWP.

Postponement of EC.

Fourth Fridays for Pubn. C.

Labour Party Pamphlet.

Studies.

Year-book. ALB as Editor. Offer of Local
Govt. to Cole

Syllabus Series. Move reference to Sub-C'ee.

Mover or Reporter

RPA to get Cole to move. Otherwise ALB.
EB.

RPD, RWP, or ALB

EB

RWP or RPD

EB.

RPA.

RPD or EB.

Draft to be submitted by RPA, on report of
his offer.

RPA to report first on those arranged, Traf-
fic, Building, Cotton, Coal. EB to raise ques-
tion of single authorship. RPA then to
propose authors for above four, HPR, HPR,
EB, Parsons, respectively.

RPA then to bring up proposed list of fur-
ther studies, with authors, as follows, Iron
& Steel, MPP; Distribution, Pountney; soap,
JTWN; Tobacco, DT; Agriculture, EB;
Oil, RPA; and possibly also Banking, MHD;
Insurance, HPR.

Cole to be fought in favor of Parsons-Rath-
bone draft of Coal Study with reference to
sub-c'ee on that basis.

RPA or EB

EB.

Specimen of Mysterious Communist Orders

equivalent of crook and liar. At the La-
bour Party Congress of 1933, when the
question of the "united front" should
theoretically have come up, it received
no consideration. But this was not be-
cause corrupt reformist leaders stamped
out a rank-and-file revolt. They had no
need to: the delegates of local labor parties,
unspoiled workers, had had so large a belly-
ful of Communist tactics that they would
not, for however just a cause, associate with
them.

While this grim hatred—continually
damped down by the necessities of

capitalist life and continually fanned by
the follies of "bolshevization"—was burn-
ing, the Communist parties were faced by
an impossible task in endeavoring to rep-
resent the workers as a mass. They had,
in all countries, a formula of an identical
kind. It has never worked in any single
country, but they still adhere to it. It is:
"The workers must support the reformist
Socialist and trade union bodies for a
time, in order that they may be disillusioned
by their treachery while in power;
they will then turn to the Communist
Party."

In fact, the fruits of this policy have always fallen into Fascist and never into Communist laps. There have been Socialist victories enough, in Britain, Italy, Germany, and Spain, and often there have been cowardice and inertia sufficient to deserve, if you so wish, the name of treachery; but the second part of the prophecy has never been fulfilled. In attempting to operate this policy, the Communist parties were compelled to say entirely opposite things at the same time. They had to urge in England, for example, the workers to support the Labour Party, because it was despicable and would betray them. T. A. Jackson, one of their leading theorists disclosed this essential contradiction in a flaming speech which induced the Communist Party to apply for affiliation with the Labour Party. "Let us take the Labour leaders by the hand," he cried, "in order later to take them by the throat." Even had not the Labour leaders callously refused this embrace, the Communist Party would before long have been hideously embarrassed by having to interpret its own slogan. Trotsky, at that time still the premier theorist of official Communism, provided a specific instruction which, more than anything else could, shows the freakish absurdity to which Communist tactics had arrived.

The Communists, he said in "Where is Britain Going?", should relentlessly expose from day to day the servile treachery

of the Labour Party lackeys, and also demand that the trade unions expel any members who failed to pay the political levy to support the aforementioned lackeys! No working class, no class at all, can possibly answer the cry, "Rally to the support of those who will betray you! Vote for thief Thomas, liar MacDonald, and traitor Henderson, that you may have the full experience of their meanness and treachery towards you!" Nor has the *Daily Worker* in England secured any considerable response for its economic campaign; for the worker who can read from one column to the other can easily put together the astounding clarion call: "Come out on strike! If you do, your leaders will instantly sell you out!"

However true such a cry may be, it has not spread revolutionary feeling; it has spread rather what the French call *je-m'en-foutisme*. Communist propaganda has induced the workers to distrust their political and economic leaders; Communist activity has caused them to dislike the Communists. The net result has been to produce that disillusioned and cynical state of mind (most favorable to Fascism) where the working class is imbued with a belief that all action must necessarily fail; and all proposals, even for the most useful and hopeful action, are greeted with the equivalents of "However thin you slice it, it's still boloney," or merely, "—and the same to you."