

By the Way

A Discussion on the Idea of Violence

Cleveland, O., June 12, 1923

Editor, Clarion:

Dear Comrade,—

While reading "By the Way," in last issue of the Clarion, I was rather impressed by an over emphasis in the writer's zeal to counteract the idea of violence in political change. This animosity towards forceful displacement of a ruling class appears as a reaction to the single-track brains and their romantic, would-be revolutionary call to armed action.

Force, indeed, does not play the important role that these men thought it did. From history's viewpoint, changes in the mode of production and its technique stand in the first rank. Force is but "midwife" between the old and new order.

It was remarked that "As to the future, he is a bold man who predicts. But it can be laid down that there is no particular outcome pre-ordained." True. Still, if events are not "pre-ordained," it does not prevent us from learning the lesson history teaches. We know that so far, no ruling class has yet given way without a fight, and we have no sound reason to hold that the future has such a surprise in store that we may give up the struggle against the ruling class before they are defeated. The capitalist surely will not turn over his wealth to the working class unless he is compelled.

There is no denying the necessity of reaching the mass of the working class, not with pet nostrums, whether they are co-operative banks, government ownership, industrial action, parliamentarism, or force, etc., but with the fundamentals of Socialism and a proletarian interpretation of events. Yet, we should not forget that we do not ordain the sequence of events.

To ensure common action, there must be unity of purpose and reasonable agreement as to methods of procedure. It can be safely said that there are no two minds alike. In the development of the working class mind towards Socialism, we must remember that the individual reacts in different ways and degrees to varying stimuli. Economic, social and political conditions are not of even tenor anywhere.

The emphasis of an anti-force sentiment is rather out of place if we know that even when we get the great majority on our side, though previous to working class rule these are all socialist (strictly speaking, a thing practically impossible) there remains yet the not to be ignored antagonist: the remainder of society—the bourgeoisie, its apologists, still deluded workmen and farmers.

Though historically force is a secondary factor, the actual struggle demands that at times it be given prime attention. And while abstractly (and abstractedly) shouting for violence will no great harm to our movement, to go the other extreme will do no good.

"Examining the concept, you will see that the thought of cataclysm involves also thinking of inertia—in nature, the rigid crust of earth;" when an earthquake occurs, it appears to be a sudden thing. The suddenness, without apparently any direct causation permits us to term the event a cataclysmic one. This does not do away with the fact that after careful examination, we find causation. The cataclysmic effect is the result of one of two opposing forces breaking the resistance of the other. When the break does come, it comes with greater force the more formidable the opposition.

And so in political revolution. They appear suddenly. Yet a variety of interacting causes are tending thence. Fundamentally, it is the result of the opposition between social production and capitalist appropriation. The latter acts as a fetter on the former.

"Then comes the period of social revolution. With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed. In considering such transformations the distinction should always be made between the

material transformation of the economic conditions of production which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic, in short ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out."

The social revolution is not cataclysmic, far from it. It marches onward even while fettered by capitalist property relations. It tends to slow down it is true. Yet it moves. When the powers of government have been torn from the hands of the master class, the proletariat frees the forces of production from its obstacles, but there is no break in social development. The latter does not start anew where it stopped. It simply increases the pace.

Not so, at a given point, with political transformation. The ideas of the mass corresponds with a given social and political development. But the ideology of a given period is that of its ruling class. However, the working class attains its own ideology independently of the bourgeoisie and is impelled by conditions going from bad to worse. The struggle takes on a critical aspect. The political rule of the bourgeoisie emits its death rattle and expires at the hands of an advancing proletariat. Here is a break. Where formerly the state functioned for the capitalist and hindered the progress of social development, now it works for a working class and furthers social evolution.

Changes, no matter whether they are social, political, economic, or earth crust, have their antecedent connections. But, there is a difference between the quietly changing technical basis of society under capitalist guidance and its culmination: a no longer enduring proletarian onrush against the mainstay of its slavery.

BERNARD TAMARKIN.

AT this writing I am unable to find a copy of the Clarion containing my article which gave occasion for Comrade Tamarkin's letter. I think, however, that my reply will repeat in the main my previous contentions on this issue raised, with some further remarks conceived to strengthen my argument. A few words before I begin my reply. I realize that among thinkers upon any issue, general agreements, however close they may be, only are possible, partly because of the difficulties lying in the scope and complexity of the social problem and partly because each as an individual has necessarily his own personal angle of vision and strives to reason as objectively as he may. Therefore I myself do not for that reason lay down the law as the final word, though convinced of the rightness of my argument, just now at any rate. My purpose is to raise thought and discussion so that we may all learn from each other's contribution to discussions. Therefore I am more than pleased to have drawn Comrade Tamarkin into a reply to myself.

I still remain unrepentant in regarding as worse than futile any dependence on violence of the scope of civil war as a means of putting into effect revolutionary aims. I maintain this attitude because I have taken account of other than merely military considerations which are involved in such a struggle within the highly dependent populous city-civilization of our modern national communities. Those who think lightly of civil war in these communities have not, I think, given much thought to consequences, and perhaps are not aware that of all kinds of warfare civil wars are always the most bitterly and atrociously fought. Moreover, the life of modern communities hangs on a thread. We live under a credit economy international in its arterial ramifications. Production languishes where credit is impaired, or ceases where it stops flowing. Under stimulus of the world market production for exchange with a view to exchange of products with foreign communities has resulted in all communities, both local and national, being dependent upon each other. A break in this traffic of goods on credit

between one community in which a revolutionary civil war prevailed, and all the others, would bring starvation to millions, and the more highly developed the community economically and thus more dependent on its foreign relationships, the worse would be the plight of its people. Russia's experience would in them be magnified manifold where they have no vast peasant economy to fall back on, which saved the Russian people from even a worse fate. If, during the war, Germany was cut off from foreign markets and supplies, at least there was unity within her borders for organizing a self-supporting economy of a kind. But an economic blockade and civil war would soon destroy a modern community. The military means of today are without example in mobility and destructiveness. Our comrade seems to resign himself hopefully, even if regretfully, to the prospect of civil war when he says that "We do not ordain the sequence of events." I, myself, however, see no hope for the revolution, but rather see the destruction of the communities in such a prospect.

True enough our powers are limited for averting such calamity, nevertheless it is our function to influence the course of events along as rational ways of procedure as possible. Having assumed the responsibility of propagating revolutionary ideas and building up and stimulating disposition and sentiment for social change, I hold that we also assume the responsibility to those we so influence and to society at large, of locating and pointing out both the dangerous and futile and the alternative constructive ways and means of change. When Comrade Tamarkin points to the lessons of the past without also mentioning the lessons that might also be got out of a study of the present social situation for what is in it, he leads me to think he fails to give it its due importance. But it is vital that we should study the present because the nature and forms of changes are always determined by the facts of the immediate present in which the changes occur. Arguing for the fact of progressive small changes in history, my remarks on the concept of "inertia" as used in conjunction with the cataclysmic theory of change, which Tamarkin refers to, were no denial of the principle of causation, having reference only to the grosser inertia of nature compared to human inertia and to the danger of the terms originated in describing phenomena applied to the phenomena of social change. In regard to the continuousness of change, I am inclined to agree with a suggestion I have read somewhere that the conditions of our kaleidoscopic modern life are influencing the human race more and more into a habit of looking for change. The complex nature of modern social life, however, may make great organizational adjustments even more difficult and seems to point to better chances for smaller ones.

I am convinced that any proposals for drastic and far-reaching social changes must have the support of an immense majority of the people to be put into effect, and that the proposals would fail if a considerable minority were not willing co-operators in the change, would still fail even though the minority felt themselves too weak to risk the chances of civil war. For a revolutionary or a labor party in power on the strength of a mere majority or even a fairly large majority to attempt to put into effect such large-scale changes would be suicidal. Coercive military power can not change wholesale, settled, habitual ways of life nor create the dispositions and habits of thought necessary for the extended co-operative life of the commonwealth of the future. Military power, as with economic power, does rest finally on the fact that the people agree, on the whole, with the purpose for which those powers are exercised. And with anything less than that agreement military power would be ineffective for change. The matter is somewhat different when military power is used in maintaining a status quo to which people are habituated than it is in changes