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## “Left Wing Communism,” an Infantile Disorder.”

By N. Lenin.

THE latest work to hand by Nicolai Lenin, the Russian Premier, is the already much discussed pamphlet “Left Wing” Communism, An Infantile Disorder.\* It is particularly addressed to the German and British proletarian movement, but is scarcely of less interest to that movement in other countries, even when their special conditions differ considerably from that of the German and British. Lenin's effort is intended as a corrective in these circles, where a religious faith prevails in the universal applicability of certain formulas and principles, or where revolutionary emotion takes the place of objective reasoning based on the observable facts of any concrete social situation.

I append the table of contents of the pamphlet as being a more satisfactory indication of the questions opened up than this review will furnish. My intention is mainly to attempt to depict what I conceive to be Lenin's philosophical attitude and method of approach to the problems of the revolutionary movement. As well as I can I shall set up Lenin's attitude and method as a standard to which readers may compare or contrast their own, which comparison peradventure, may be the shortest way round for some of us to see the error of our ways. For after all, the standard of judgment or point of view we hold is of decisive influence on the nature of the opinions we form upon any matter, and is also mainly responsible for the disagreements amongst us. Just as with primitive man who imputed to all objects in nature animate and inanimate, life and desires and passions like his own, so human beings today are perforce bound to approach any subject with mental prepossessions. All of which means that if you wish to understand how Lenin arrives at his conclusions you must see through Lenin's eyes, i.e., you must understand his mental attitude and method of approach to the questions he discusses. An understanding of Lenin in that respect is relatively easy when reading his work, if not so easy for an indifferent scribe to set down on paper, for Lenin wears his heart on his sleeve in respect of his science and philosophy. Lenin is preeminently a philosopher, a student of history and of science and the scientific method. He is a philosopher, not in the bad old sense of the “fixity” of things of classical philosophy, but in the modern scientific sense that sees that the values of life consist in growth and development. In the work I am reviewing, his facts and his arguments, pro and con, are carried along, lifted up in the full tide of his philosophy of life, and his scientific objective method is always apparent, even violently so, and to hand. His is an objective practical mind, conscious of itself as such, and, while valuing the subjective power of the mind for making useful abstractions and generalizing formulas out of the many concrete things, he has a dogmatic faith in the necessity of getting the facts of every concrete social situation, as they appear in time and place, for an understanding of the nature of the problems of the revolutionary struggle and the tactical policies to be adopted. Those who disagree with Lenin's strictures against the “Left” Communists in Germany and Britain, after reading his book, can, I think, only do so on the grounds that they have knowledge and facts at their

command which he has not. So far as his objective logic is concerned, as he understands the facts of the situation, it is masterly.

Lenin is unsparing with his rod of iron on those who permit emotion, or the “purely” intellectual subjective processes of the mind to work out “fixed” universal formulas of action, idols of their own making, to be rigidly followed no matter what the fluid and changing conditions of distinctly different concrete social situations may be. The attractions and dangers of fixed formulas are that they tend to act as substitutes for observation and thought; on the other hand, the objective method entails constant observation and thought and possible change in tactics.

In the active political life of mass movements and the disposition of parties this leads to “daring” tactics and to walking on the thin ice of opportunism. Lenin distinguishes between the compromise of the patriotic Socialists with the bourgeoisie during the war, which was treachery to the working class, and compromise such as the Bolsheviks made in signing the treaty with the Germans at Brest Litovsk in order to preserve the gains of the Russian revolution. He also gives many other instances when, he says, the Bolsheviks compromised with advantage by forming temporary alliances with opposing parties, both before and after the October revolution. Whether the political developments in other countries, and the strength in numbers and understanding of the Communist movement in them, warrant the Communist parties adopting those tactics, as is urged upon them by Lenin, is a matter so gravely in question that the Communist movements in Germany and Britain are split over the matter. In any event, whatever of significance the history of the Russian movement holds for them, the primary deciding factors should be the conditions special to their own countries.

Lenin attacks the “Left” Communists of Germany for their tactics in leaving the old conservative trade unions, their advocacy of “non-participation in parliamentary activities,” and of “no compromise,” also for making a distinction between “leaders and masses.” To Lenin, trades unions, parliaments, compromise and leaders are instruments to be made use of as occasion requires in the interests of the revolution.

Quoting statistics as to the rapid growth of membership in trade unions, he says that they are just the organizations where the masses are to be found and to fear their conservatism “and try to avoid it, to jump over it . . . indicates a lack of confidence in the role of the proletarian vanguard to train, educate and enlighten, to enthrone with new life, the most backward groups and masses of the working class and the peasantry. . . . For the whole of the Communist problem is to be able to convince the backward, to work in their midst and not to set up a barrier between us and them, a barrier of artificial childishly ‘Left’ slogans.” (Emphasis Lenin's.)

Dealing with the question of non-participation in parliaments, and the reason given by the “Lefts,” that “parliaments are worn out,” he (in part) says: “. . . parliamentarism is historically worn-out” in a world-historical sense, that is to say, the epoch of bourgeois parliamentarism has come to an end; the epoch of proletarian dictatorship has begun. This is incontrovertibly true. But the scale of the world's

history is reckoned by decades. Ten or twenty years sooner or later . . . from the point of view of world history it is a trifle. But this is just why it is a crying theoretical mistake to refer, in questions of practical politics, to the world-historical scale. . . .

How is it possible to say the ‘parliament is worn out,’ when millions of proletarians not only stand up for parliamentarism generally, but are directly counter-revolutionary? . . . It is evident that the ‘Left’ in Germany have mistaken their desire, their ideopolitical attitude, for objective reality. This is the most dangerous error which can be made by revolutionaries.” Elsewhere, he says: “They (the ‘Left’ in general) . . . naively mistake the subjective ‘denial’ of a reactionary institution for its destruction in reality by the united forces of a whole series of objective factors. . . . Participation in parliamentary elections and the struggle on the parliamentary platform is obligatory for the party of the revolutionary proletariat, just for the purpose of educating the backward masses of its own class, just in order to awake and enlighten the undeveloped, down-trodden, ignorant masses. Just so long as you are unable to disperse the bourgeois parliament and other reactionary institutions, you are bound to work inside them, and for the very reason that there are still workmen within them being made fools of . . .” “Tactics,” he says, “should be constructed on a sober and strictly objective consideration of the forces of a given country (and of the countries surrounding it, and of all countries, on a world scale), as well as on an evaluation of the experience of other revolutionary movements. . . .”

He points to Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht in Germany, and Z. Högglund in Sweden, as examples of a truly revolutionary utilization of reactionary parliaments, and sees no reason, with the growth of the revolutionary masses, why a communist faction could not be hammered out in parliament to carry on a stubborn struggle to expose, dispose and overcome the bourgeois-democratic illusions held by the backward masses of the workers and peasantry. In this chapter he gives a short but graphic history of Bolshevik parliamentary activity to illustrate his argument for parliamentary activity; as indeed he does on any phase of Bolshevik activity as it bears on the subject of each chapter, so that the book is valuable for its historical contents and dissertations on the revolutionary struggles in Russia.

In regard to the “Left” slogan of “down with the leaders,” Lenin gives several pages of serious consideration to it, including with it an explanation why he thinks it is necessary, even after the revolution, for a length of time determined by the disappearance of the corrupting influence of petit-bourgeois ideas, for a Communist party to act as the political vanguard of the proletarian masses. This party leadership question, however, is I think with us in Canada, a remote one. In one passage he makes fun of the slogan as it relates to individual leaders as follows: “It is especially comical that instead of old leaders who have a common-sense viewpoint on ordinary matters, new leaders are put forth (concealed under the slogan of ‘down with leaders’) who practice supernatural nonsense and spread confusion.”

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