

WESTERN CLARION

A Journal of
CURRENT
EVENTS

Official Organ of
THE SOCIALIST PARTY OF CANADA

HISTORY
ECONOMICS
PHILOSOPHY

No. 927

TWENTIETH YEAR.

Twice a Month

VANCOUVER, B. C., NOVEMBER 17, 1924

FIVE CENTS

The Rise and Decline of Neo-Communism

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(Reprint from "The Modern Quarterly").

THE popular and artistic descriptions of the Russian Revolution by J. Reed, Albert Rhys Williams and others, served as a warning to me not to take seriously anything that romantically inclined reporters, dreaming of socialism, might write about social and economic questions. What has happened in Russia? According to the above-named writers, and according to many of their friends, the soldiers in Russia wanted peace, the peasants land, and the workers socialism. The Kerensky government not giving them what they wanted, they then decided to make another revolution. The thought naturally occurred to them that if they should make a second revolution within a few months after the first, it would be wise to make it a Social Revolution. So they did. How very simple it was! And how beautifully they have done it! Read John Reed or Williams and you will find that the makers of the Russian Revolution were more like angels than human beings; what heroism and self-sacrifice these peasants and soldiers showed, what bravery they exhibited! It really sounds more like a fairy tale than a statements of facts.

The Reeds and the Williamses and their kind are socialists by sentiment. Socialism for them is an artistic dream—nothing more. They are really bourgeois intellectuals who come to hate present society out of sheer ennui. It is not their business to inquire whether Russian productive forces have developed to a point where a social revolution is possible; nor is it their business to inquire whether the peasants could ever be relied upon by the proletariat in its fight for socialism. They have seen the Russian Revolution, they have seen a grand uprising, they have met a few leaders and found them "jolly fellows;" they have read a few revolutionary proclamations that sounded terribly revolutionary to their tamed American minds—and they liked it all. At home they also tried to "frighten the philistines" by writing terrible stories and committing as many little unconventionalities as were permissible in the literary circles of Greenwich Village. They liked the revolution. It was so different, so much more exciting than they had at any time dreamed!

I well remember a debate between John Reed and a certain New York Menshevist. Reed's opponent, thoroughly educated in Marxism, asked Reed whether he believed that Bolshevism is not just the opposite of Marxism. Reed replied in somewhat these terms:

Oh, you fellows are not living beings; at best you are bookworms always thinking about what Marx said or meant to say. What we want is a revolution, and we are going to make it—not with books, but with rifles.

The audience liked it very much, and through a very generous applause acknowledged Reed the victor of the debate. But if there were socialists in the audience to whom Marx is more than a name and socialism more than an artistic sentiment, I am

sure that they must have shaken their heads gravely and said to themselves, "No, nothing good can come out of this kind of propaganda." The proletarian audience, with hate burning in their hearts towards existing capitalism, drank in the words of these romantic admirers of Bolshevism and found in them a momentary satisfaction like the drunkard in his wine, and like the latter, they did not give thought to the disappointment and disillusion that would come when the sobering-up process had set in.

What really happened in Russia is this. After the first revolution chaos prevailed. The peasants did not wait for the provisional government to finish its agrarian program. They simply seized the land of the big and even small landlords and divided it. They were ready to support any government that would ratify what they had already accomplished. The army was demoralized, the soldiers having deserted openly and in groups. The soldiers wanted peace (as well as the peasants and workers), but they cared very little what kind of peace they should get; they wanted peace not because they were internationalists or pacifists, but because they wanted to go home to their families and to the new land that they were now acquiring. They cared not whether the kind of peace they should get would help or hinder international socialism. They would have supported any government that would have made an end to the war. Still worse were the conditions of Russian industry. Transportation was disorganized, raw materials scarce, and in some instances unobtainable. The prices of the means of life soared to such an alarming height that no manufacturer could afford to pay workers a living wage. As a consequence increased unemployment spread, and with it dissatisfaction with the government increased. "Why doesn't the government do something!" the masses demanded. What could the government do?

There were only two ways out—either to restore order by depriving the peasants of the expropriated lands and by shooting down the workers, or ratifying the expropriations of the land, nationalize the mines and factories, and get out of the war by all means. The Kerensky government could not do any of these things. It had no loyal army to rely upon, and, besides, it was a coalition government. It could not afford to break openly with either the workers and peasants or with the landlords and capitalists. There was no middle way. The Russian bourgeoisie was small and unorganized and powerless. The most sweeping social reforms were possible, reforms that would have brought the Russian workers nearer to socialism than the workers of any other country.

Neither the Social Revolutionists nor the Mensheviks correctly understood what they were to do. Moreover, none of them had the courage to do what the objective conditions required of them. The only party that understood clearly the latent possibilities of the moment was the Bolshevik party. Lenin, of course, knew very well that there could be no question about establishing socialism in Russia. In his

polemic against Kamenev, Steklov and others who later became his chief helpers, he made this point very clear. "But," said Lenin, "if we can get the government in our hands, we will use it to strengthen the position of the Russian proletariat." It was only later that he expressed his belief in the possibility of establishing socialism in present-day Russia.

In a disorganized Russia, with a government that had the support of few, it was comparatively easy for a small but determined minority to get the state power in their hands through a military coup d'etat. We must not forget that the Bolsheviks were at first in favor of a popular democratic constitutional assembly. They took over the state power until the constitutional assembly met. They did not think then that democracy was a bourgeois prejudice. But when the constitutional assembly met, the Bolsheviks found that they were in the minority, and what is more, they understood that they could not get a majority in any national election at all, even though they had tried to satisfy the peasants by ratifying the land expropriations. At once they felt that the democratic way would not do for present-day Russia. They then dissolved the constitutional assembly and declared the dictatorship of the proletariat.

This was not enough. Being a small minority, they understood well enough that with freedom of speech, press and assembly, with free discussion going on all over the country, they would not be able to hold out against the other parties, and they therefore had to declare all such institutions to be merely bourgeois prejudices, and abolish them. But even this was not enough. They also knew that though the bourgeois parties could not very well compete with them, the socialist parties could, and they thereupon began a war of extermination against all new and competing radical parties. The red terror was more against the Mensheviks and social republicans than against the bourgeoisie.

Now what was the influence of all this on the proletariat of other countries?

Long before the war and the Russian revolution it was apparent that there was great dissatisfaction within the rank and file of the socialist movement. Socialism in its last phase, though retaining its

1. It was not a question of theory at all. The Bolsheviks did not come at first with ready-made plans to execute. As a matter of fact, they took over the government because they were compelled to do it—compelled by the circumstances—and whatever they have done in Russia, no matter how much we disagree with them, was done because there was no other way at the time. It was terrible to read that the first proletarian government was arresting hundreds of socialists. The thought that the first Socialist Republic had to do away with freedom of speech, press and assembly was very grievous to every socialist, but nevertheless we all felt that there was no other way; all this was the result of Russian conditions. Above all, we knew that it was either the Bolsheviks or the monarchists, and whoever allied themselves with the latter to fight against the Soviet government became traitors to socialism, even if they did it with the best socialist intentions.