

The Rise and Decline of Neo-Communism

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(Continued from last issue)

THE hopes for a speedy world revolution did not materialize. The workers were dissatisfied, and they demanded certain things—above all, work—but it seems that they were not ready for the revolution. What should the revolutionary army do meanwhile? It was necessary to do something, so the order was given out from the general headquarters, "Start the revolution by all means, call out a revolution artificially, get the workers to rise in arms, even if you have to fool them a little; it is, after all, for their own good." There were great strikes and much underlying labor unrest in Italy, so the Italian party was ordered to start the revolution, but before starting the revolution it had to expel all the reformists and see that none of them held a position in a union or cooperative society. Serrati, in the name of the great majority of the party, replied:

We, living in Italy, knowing well the conditions of our country, know that to start a revolution now would be madness, and as to expelling the reformists, it would cause a split in our ranks and weaken us just at the moment when we need all the strength we can get. We cannot take away the jobs from all the non-communists because they don't agree with us on certain principles. They may be bad socialists, but they are good specialists, able and experienced men, and to put inexperienced communists in their places would ruin our co-operation, and in the unions we have not the power to do it, even if we should wish to.

The Italian party, notwithstanding Serrati's admonition, was split, the majority expelled, its strength broken.

The German Communist party knew its duties. They knew that their business was to make a revolution; besides, they were steadily reminded of it by the communist international. But the great majority of the German workers did not want such a revolution. The communists then proceeded to compel the workers, to provoke them to it. The result was the tragic and infamous March "putch." That the German workers were not ready for the revolution is now admitted by the communists themselves. Zinoviev has this to say about both uprisings in Germany:

In the year 1918-19 only a minority of the German workers followed Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. On the opposite pole, again only a minority of the German workers followed the bloodhound Noske. The main mass, the center of the German working class, vacillated. This kernel—the general mass of the working class—sought peaceful means. That "middle" mass, which in the final instance decided the course of the struggle, at that time wanted no civil war, it feared the revolution, it reckoned that in a legal way—through the trade unions, through universal suffrage, through the German socialist party—it would slowly but surely improve its condition and secure a piece of bread and work.

The Spartacists, the vanguard of the workers, were still very weak numerically in the year 1919. In the years 1918-19 the Spartacists were held in very high esteem by the workers. Many workers silently recognized the courage and great devotion of the Spartacist minority to the cause of the working class, for they intercepted with their breast the cruelest blows of the counter-revolution, and they defended unflinchingly the interests of the entire working class. But even though the Spartacists enjoyed the esteem which they deserved, nevertheless they were not followed. The kernel of the working class regarded the daring Spartacist people not without sympathy. Yet when it came to action they supported the social democrats.

In March of the year 1921 the Spartacist vanguard of the working class threw itself anew into the struggle. The Communist vanguard itself attempted to replace by means of itself the greater mass of the working class, that greater mass which at that time was under the almost unrestricted influence of the German social democracy, by whom it

was lulled to sleep with counter-revolutionary, sweet and senseless lullabies and hopes. And once more considerable sections of the German workers regarded not without sympathy the daring revolutionaries who time and again carried the blows of the counter-revolution. But once more these heroes remained without support from the greater mass of the workers. The vanguard, which rose up too early, was defeated.—(Worker, December 8, 1923. "The German Working Classes, the German Communists and the German Social Democrats.")

Of course, it was very wrong of the German workers to follow the social democrats, but what could be done? The communists should have waited until the workers would have been communistically educated, but impatience is the chief characteristic of neo-communism. They started their March Revolution, a putch, as advocated by Bakounine. The national chairman of the party, Paul Levi, had protested. He had written a brochure to show that dishonest and anti-socialist means were being used to deceive the workers. Clara Zetkin, Hoffman and others protested; later they resigned from the central committee. The third congress of the Communists pronounced the March uprising a crime, but Paul Levi was expelled, and many others went with him, and the communist tactics remained the same.

In the article that I mentioned before, Zinoviev says:

The lesson was not in vain. With the help of the Third World Congress of the Communist International, the German communist party was able to correctly gauge the mistakes of the past. The question of uprising, of the immediate struggle for power, was pushed aside in the year 1921, and without moment's hesitation a new task was set—the winning over of a majority of the workers.

They have learned their lesson, it is true, but too late. Since March, 1921, the communist movement in Germany, as well as everywhere else, has been discredited. The workers view it with distrust and look upon the organization very much as upon a band of adventurers. But one thing they have succeeded in, and that is in breaking every party in Europe.

On the eve of the third congress of the communist International (June, 1921) a new spirit began to manifest itself within the communist movement. Lenin had published his "infantile sickness, left communism," in which he bitterly criticized his followers for believing and trying to practice what he himself was preaching or endorsing. But more frank than Lenin was the chief propagandist of Communism, Karl Radek. In an article entitled "Glossen Zur Congress der Communist International," published in the German Communist magazine "Die Internationale" (September, 1921), he says:

The belief in a speedy world revolution was very widespread in our movement. . . . The second congress did not do anything to correct this false view because the red army was then victorious over Poland, and it had aroused false hopes.

What were these hopes? Radek related that even Bucharin believed in the great role that the red army would play in the world revolution. One of the delegates told Radek very clearly:

It is evident that as a result of our victory over Poland, we also shall succeed in breaking through in Germany and elsewhere and make the revolution.

So you see, the revolution was to be forced on the workers of the European countries by the red army. This was so original and so revolutionary that Bakounine himself did not dare to dream of it. But experience showed something quite different. In his "Report on the Economic World C. 21,"

Trotsky summed up these experiences in the following words:

We learned this through our own erroneous acts . . . that we are not so immediately near our final goal—the conquest of power all over the world, and the world revolution. In 1919 we said to ourselves, it is a question of months, and now we say—it is perhaps a question of years. (Bulletin of the Third Congress of the Communist International, June 27, 1921, No. 2.)

What was to be done? The tactics of the Communist International, as expressed in the theses and resolutions of the second congress, were good for "war time only," but now that the realization had come that "perhaps it was a question of years" until the world revolution could arrive, what was the communist army to do in the meanwhile? Evidently it would not do now to try and create more splits, to isolate itself from the entire working class, and ignoring the latter's struggles for his immediate demands, go on shouting, "Make the social revolution." The third congress, therefore, adopted the so-called "new tactics," the tactics of the "united front."

The united front is a thorough departure from what was known as communism. Instead of anathematizing everybody that did not agree with them and always looking for points of disagreements, the communists were told to try and find some way to again unify proletarian forces, create a united front with the same people whom they before had declared as "lackeys of the bourgeois," as the real enemies of the proletariat, etc. Moreover, the necessity for a united front was declared to be the result of a new conviction of the communist leaders, the conviction that they needed a majority of the working class in their favor in order to accomplish their aim. The Bakounist ideas that largely determined the character of the communist movement were discarded, and a return to the old social democrat viewpoint effected. There were, of course, delegates at the third congress who understood perfectly well that the united front meant the abandonment of the chief principles of communism. Thus Delegate Tetracini, of Italy (to quote only one), said:

It should not be said in the theses that we need a majority of the workers for communism, because this will be a weapon in the hands of the reformists against us, because they, the reformists, always argued that we must have a majority of the proletariat before the revolutionary fight can successfully begin.

Tetracini was right. This was always the social-democratic view, against which the communists put up their Bakounist view of a "revolution by a minority."

More important still, is the new view on the reform activities of the workers that the third congress adopted. Until the third congress every reform activity was declared to be detrimental to the class struggle, and any one who was willing to fight for reforms within the capitalist society was an "agent of the capitalist class," but the third congress now declared: "It is the duty of the communist parties to endeavor by means of their influence in the trade unions, by increased pressure on other parties connected with the working masses, to bring about the struggle for the achievement of the immediate needs of the proletariat . . . every objection to the establishment of such partial demands, every accusation of reformism in connection with the partial struggles, is an outcome of the same incapacity to grasp the live issues of revolutionary action which manifested itself in the opposition of some communist-groups to participa-

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