

Bourgeois Democracy and Proletarian Dictatorship

I.

THE development of the revolutionary movement of the proletariat in all countries has inspired the Bourgeoisie—and its agents in the labor-organizations—to strenuous efforts in the discovery of idealistic political arguments in favor of the control now exercised by the exploiters. In these arguments special emphasis is laid upon the rejection of dictatorship and the safe-guarding of democracy. Yet the hypocritical and lying nature of such arguments, repeated in a thousand variations by the capitalist press, and by the Conference of the yellow International held in Berne during February 1919, must be obvious to anyone who does not contemplate betrayal of the basic principles of socialism.

II.

These arguments depend primarily upon the concepts of "essential democracy" and "essential dictatorship," never raising the question of the class implicated. Such a formulation of the problem from a point of view apart from and above the class viewpoint and ostensibly valid for the population as a whole, is a direct mockery of the basic principle of socialism, namely, the principle of the class-struggle, a principle which is acknowledged in words but forgotten in deeds by those Socialists who have gone over to the camp of the bourgeoisie. For in no civilized capitalist country does "essential democracy" exist, but only a bourgeois democracy, and the question does not turn on "essential dictatorship" but on dictatorship by the oppressed class, i. e., the proletariat, over the oppressors and exploiters, i. e., the bourgeoisie, for the purpose of overcoming the resistance of the exploiters in their struggle to remain in control.

III.

History teaches that an oppressed class never could acquire power without going through a period of dictatorship, i. e., a period of conquest of the political power and of forcible suppression of the desperate and frantic resistance, shrinking from no crime, that is always displayed by the exploiters. The bourgeoisie, whose control is now defended by Socialists who prate of "essential dictatorship" and who are body and soul for "essential democracy," won its domination in the civilized countries by means of a series of revolutions and civil wars, by means of the forcible suppression of royal power, of feudal power, of slaveholders, and of their attempts to re-establish themselves. In books, in pamphlets, in the resolutions of their congresses, in their speeches, Socialists in all countries have explained to the people a thousand, nay, a million times, the class-nature of this bourgeois revolution. That is why the present defense of "bourgeois democracy" in speeches on "essential democracy," and the present denunciation of the dictatorship of the proletariat in the outcry against "essential dictatorship," constitutes a direct betrayal of socialism, an actual defection into the camp of the bourgeoisie, a denial of the right of the proletariat to its proletarian revolution, a defense of bourgeois reformism at an historical crisis when bourgeois reformism the world over has collapsed and the war has created a revolutionary situation.

By N. Lenin

(The following Theses by Comrade Lenin, which formulate the theory underlying the attitude of the Communist International with respect to the problem of Bourgeois Democracy and Proletarian Dictatorship, were transmitted to the Bureau of the International with Instructions to procure for them the widest possible publicity).

IV.

In explaining the class-nature of bourgeois civilization, of bourgeois parliamentarism, all Socialists have uttered the thought set forth with the utmost scientific exactness by Marx and Engels: that the most democratic bourgeois republic is nothing but a machine for the oppression of the laboring class by the bourgeoisie, of the mass of workers by a handful of capitalists. There is not a single former revolutionary, not a single erstwhile Marxist among those who now declaim against dictatorship and in favor of democracy who did not at one time swear, by all that he held most holy, that he acknowledged this basic truth of Socialism. Now, however, when there is a ferment among the proletariat and a movement aimed at the destruction of this machine of oppression and at the conquest of a dictatorship for the proletariat, these traitors to Socialism place the matter in such a light as to make it seem that the bourgeoisie has actually made a gift of "pure democracy" to the workers, that the bourgeoisie are disposed to forego all resistance and to yield to a majority of the workers, that a democratic republic is not a political instrument for the oppression of labor by capital.

V.

The Paris Commune, which is applauded by all who wish to be recognized as Socialists, since they know that the mass of the workers have a great and sincere sympathy with it,—the Paris Commune revealed most clearly the historical relativity and the limited value of bourgeois parliamentarism and bourgeois democracy which, in comparison with the Middle Ages, constitute very progressive institutions, to be sure, but which in this Age of the Proletarian Revolution call inevitably for radical changes. Marx himself, who set the greatest store on the historical significance of the Commune, laid bare in his analysis of the movement the exploiting nature of bourgeois democracy and bourgeois parliamentarism, a system which gives the oppressed class the right to decide, once in so many years, which ambassador of the owning classes is to stand for and upon the people in parliament. And it is at this time, when the soviet-movement is taking hold all over the world, carrying on the cause of the Commune everywhere, that the betrayers of Socialism forget both practical experience and the concrete lessons of the Paris Commune and repeat the ancient bourgeois nonsense about "essential democracy." The Commune was a non-parliamentary institution.

VI.

The importance of the Commune lay in the further fact that it made an attempt to destroy and uproot the bourgeois state-machinery, the bureaucratic, judicial, military, and police-machinery, and to replace it by the self-governing mass-organization of workers, rid of the separation of legislative and administrative power. All the bourgeois-democratic republics of our time,

among them the German, which, by a mockery of the truth, is designated as a proletarian republic by the betrayers of Socialism, have retained this bourgeois state-machinery. All of which proves, again and again, most plainly and clearly, that the outcry raised in defense of "essential democracy" represents nothing but the defense of the bourgeoisie and its exploitation-privileges.

VII.

"Freedom of assembly" may be taken as an example of the requirements of "pure democracy." Every conscious worker who has not deserted his class sees without further ado that it would be nonsense to promise his exploiters freedom of assembly during the period and under the circumstances when the latter are resisting their downfall and defending their privileges. At a period when the bourgeoisie itself was still revolutionary, it did not allow freedom of assembly, either in England in 1649, or in France in 1793, to the royalists and nobility (when the latter brought foreign troops into the country and "assembled" in order to organize an attempt at restoration). Should the contemporary bourgeoisie, long since become reactionary, demand that the proletariat guarantee in advance "freedom of assembly" to their exploiters regardless of what opposition the capitalists may set up against their dispossession, then the proletariat will merely be moved to laughter at such a display of bourgeois hypocrisy.

On the other hand, workers know very well that "freedom of assembly," even in the most democratic bourgeois republics, is an empty phrase, for the wealthy classes have the disposal of the best public and private buildings, and have enough leisure for assemblage. They enjoy the protection of the bourgeois machinery of force. The city and the village proletariat, as well as the peasants, i. e., the overwhelming majority of the population, have neither the first, nor the second, nor the third. So long as this state of affairs continues, "equality", i. e., "pure democracy," will remain a fraud. In order to establish a real equality, in order actually to realize democracy for the workers, it would be necessary first to take all the magnificent private and public structures away from the exploiters, to provide leisure for the workers, and to see to it that the freedom of their assemblies is safeguarded by armed workers, not by scions of the nobility or by officers drawn from capitalistic circles and placed in command of intimidated troops.

Not until such a change has taken place will it be possible to speak of freedom of assembly, of equality, without making mock of the working people, of the poor. But this change can be brought about only by the vanguard of the working people, the proletariat, which dethrones the exploiters, the bourgeoisie.

VIII.

"Freedom of the press" is another of the chief watchwords of "pure democracy." But workers all know, and the Socialists of all countries have admitted millions of times, that this freedom must remain a fraud as long as the best presses and the most abundant supplies of paper remain in the hands of the capitalists, as long as capital retains its power over the press,—a control which manifests itself most clearly and sharply, most cynically, wherever democracy and a