

MASS ACTION AND REVOLUTION

(CHAPTER FROM "SOCIAL DEMOCRACY AND COMMUNISM")

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(Translated from German)

Editorial Note. The article printed below represents only one chapter of a pamphlet dealing with the question of mass action in its entirety, as well as other tactical problems confronting Communist parties and the revolutionary proletariat in general in various countries. Therefore, this article is necessarily incomplete, touching superficially, in a very general way, without entering very deeply into details,—not touching upon certain questions at all. Moreover, this pamphlet from which this article is reprinted, having been published in Germany, in response to a certain particular situation on certain questions, created in the course of the revolutionary working class movement in that particular country, has by necessity, been narrowed in its scope and in its application (and even in its political illustrations) to the specific needs and requirements of that country.

Consequently, this article, in order to justify its title, needs a great deal of elaboration and additional explanation.

However, leaving this and a more elaborate treatment of the problem in question, to future articles on Mass Action and allied problems which it is our intention to publish in The Communist, we shall limit this editorial note to a few remarks absolutely essential and indispensable, in our opinion.

1) It should be noted that the article reprinted below, does not tackle the question of Mass Action in its entirety, does not analyze the different forms of Mass Action, such as for instance, mass demonstrations, general strike, armed insurrection, etc., and the conditions of their application. The article takes only one aspect of mass action, namely, its indirectness, or direct character,—as against the indirect character of parliamentary or any other action where the masses do not act directly, but through the medium of some intermediary agencies, such as parliamentary and "diplomatic" representatives, and "leaders." Thus, the scope of this article may be formulated as: **direct vs. indirect action.**

2) Even this, more limited problem is not treated exhaustively, being mainly confined to parallels taken from the history of the German working class movement, between the attitude of the old Social-Democratic "leaders" and the present Communist attitude.

There are two kinds of leaders—the former (represented by Scheidemanns, Kautskys, MacDonalds, Snowdenes, Longuets, etc.) act, as if to **supplant** the masses without any attempt or even an idea to call upon the masses for action to rely upon their organized support, without taking the masses into their confidence whatsoever, and quite often, if not always, **against the interests of the masses.** These are "leaders" who want their army—the masses—to perform only one "action," namely, to elect them into office, and then to disappear. They do not want their army to fight, they expect to accomplish everything through their wisdom and "diplomatic" manipulations.

The latter—the true leaders, are those who act **together with the masses;** who prepare them for mass action, and when the time comes—they lead the masses in their assaults upon the enemy. These leaders are represented by Lenin, Trotsky, etc.

We often hear cries raised against "leaders"—leaders are this and that—we must get rid of leaders—they cannot be trusted, etc. etc. In this connection we should remember the old proverb that we should not throw out the child together with the dirty water. In throwing away from the working class movement, such "leaders" as Scheidemann, Noske and Kautsky, we should not also throw out such leaders as Lenin and Trotsky, whose role and importance in the revolutionary proletarian movement cannot be overestimated.

The antagonism between Communism and Social-Democracy had already become evident before the war, although not under this name. At that time it related to tactics. Under the name of "Left Radicals" ("Linksradikale") an opposition manifested itself in the ranks of the Social-Democracy (out of which originated the older adherents of the present-day Communists), who, in spite of the opposition of the radicals and revisionists proved the necessity of mass action. In this fight, the radical spokesmen, such as Kautsky, were forced to reveal the anti-revolutionary character of their views and tactics.

The parliamentary and trade-union struggle under the rule of the young and vigorous capitalism had slightly ameliorated the conditions of the working class, and, at the same time, had erected a bulwark against the ever-lasting tendency of capitalism to impoverish them. But in the last decade, this bulwark, despite the powerful organization, broke down. Imperialism strengthened the power of capitalism and of militarism, weakened the power of parliament, forced trade-unions to take a defensive position, and prepared the world war. It became clear that the old weapons of waging the class struggle had become obsolete. The masses felt this instinctively. In all countries they were actually seen to be engaged in activities, often against the will of their leaders,—now in tremendous trade-union conflicts, now in transportation strikes that paralyzed industrial life, or else, in demonstrations of a political nature very often the eruption of the proletarian revolt and the show of its power so shakes the self-assurance of the bourgeoisie that it granted concessions. Oftimes, too, these outbreaks were throttled by massagers. The Social Democratic leaders seek to use these movements for the furtherance of their own political aims. They acknowledge the usefulness of political strikes for definite purposes to be tolerated only on the condition that they be waged within prescribed limits—to be initiated and terminated at the command of the leaders. And, above all, in tactical questions to be subordinated to the injunction of the leaders. In this prescribed manner strikes have been waged at times. But of no avail. The policy of compromise introduced by the leaders usually paralyzes the powerful force of the instinctive outbreaks, for it is supposed to be subordinate to this policy of compromise. Moreover, the menace of danger which inspires the reigning bourgeoisie—the feeling of uncertainty as to the proportions such mass actions can take on and grow into a revolutionary movement—was absent from both of the "disciplined" mass actions whose harmlessness had been proclaimed in advance.

The revolutionary Marxists, the present Communists, saw even then the narrowness of the prevailing views of the ranks of the Social-Democrats. They knew that throughout all history the masses, even the classes, were the driving and active power in all revolutions; that revolutions never came about through the reasoned and wise counsels and procedure of the acknowledged leaders. When conditions became unendurable, the masses, for any cause whatsoever, broke loose, wiped out the old powers and called into power a new class or stratum capable of erecting a state or society to suit their needs. Only during

the last half century or comparatively peaceful development could the illusion be created that leaders were the only beings who could, through their superior wisdom, direct the destinies of peoples. The members of Parliament, officials of the Central Executive Committees, believe that their deeds, speeches, transactions and resolutions determine the course of events. The masses standing behind them are or occasionally make their appearance when they are called for the purpose of lending emphasis to the words of their spokesmen, only again promptly disappearing from the political horizon. The mass is to play a passive role merely, it has to elect leaders, who then act as the effective force of revolution.

If this viewpoint has any real value in regard to former revolutions in history, it is even thus of less value when the great difference between bourgeois and proletarian revolutions is taken into consideration. In bourgeois revolutions the mass of workers and the petty bourgeoisie took an active part but once (as in Paris in February 1848) or only then, when as in the great French Revolution, for the purpose of overthrowing an old empire or a new untenable power like the Girondists. When they had performed their task, then the representatives of the bourgeoisie would have appeared as new individuals, as a new government, in order to reconstruct and renew the State institutions, the Constitution, the laws. The proletarian mass power was needed to overthrow the old order but not to build up the new one, because the new system of society was the organization of a new class.

According to this model the radical Social-Democrats also conceived the proletarian revolution, which they—contrary to the reformers—considered necessary. In their opinion, a tremendous uprising of the people was to remove the old absolutist military domination, put the Social-Democrats into power and the Social-Democrats will do the rest, and through the enactment of new laws would create the Socialist order. Thus did they conceive the proletarian revolution. But this revolution is an entirely different thing. The proletarian revolution is the liberation of the masses from all class domination and exploitation.

That means that they themselves take the reins of destiny into their own creation. But of the old race of narrow-minded slaves who only think of themselves and cannot see further than their workshop, new beings must evolve—defiant, ready for the conflict, of independent spirit, filled with the strength of solidarity, no longer confused by the treacherous bourgeois teachings, and capable of independently adjusting themselves to conditions. This change cannot come about through want, bitter disappointment, occasional victories and repeated defeats, gradually gain the power, the firm unity, and the ripe understanding for freedom and power. This long process of struggle is the proletarian revolution.

The duration of this process will differ according to countries and conditions, and will depend mainly upon the power of the resistance put forth by the dominant class. The reason that the process was terminated with comparative speed in Russia was due to the fact that the bourgeoisie there was weak, and that its combination with the landed aristocracy drove the peasants on the side of the working class. The great institution of power of the bourgeoisie is the State-Power—that all-potent, intricately branched organization of domination with all the means for exerting power at its command—legislation, the schools, the police, the courts, the army and the bureaucracy that has all the directing power of all the channels of public life in its hands.

Revolution is the combat of the proletariat against this machinery of power of the ruling class, and it can only attain their liberation by confronting this hostile organization by a more formidable and powerful organization. The State power and the bourgeoisie seek to keep the workers powerless, divided and intimidated in order to crush the slightest strivings toward unity by force and deception and divide their forces in all directions. In opposition to this power the working class applies mass action, which paralyzes the state machinery and causes it to crumble. As long as the state remains intact, the proletariat cannot be victorious, for over and over again will it see the State rise against it. The conflict then—if the world is not to go down in utter ruin through capitalism—must end so, that finally, the repeated mighty actions of the proletariat crushes the bureaucratic state machinery and it breaks down powerless.

* Karl Kautsky took exception to this interpretation of the proletarian revolution even before the war. He maintained that the proletariat should not be guided by the tactics which would lead them to destroy the State power, because it would have to use his state machinery for proletariat in order to enact the laws in the State's own purposes. All the ministers of the present State were also needed under the rule of the interests of the workers. The aim of the proletariat must be to seize and not to destroy the State. The question was raised in this connection as to how the state machinery of the victorious proletariat would be created—whether it would be a continuation of the bourgeois state, as Kautsky maintained, or a newly-constructed machinery. But the Social-Democratic theories as they were formulated and propagated by Kautsky for thirty years, had always spoken of the economics of capitalism out of which Socialism would "necessarily" originate. They never dealt with the "how," and for that reason the question of the State and the revolution could not be answered. It was only later explained. The difference between the Communist and Social-Democratic interpretations had, however, become quite evident.

For the Social-Democrats, the sole act—the uprising of the people, which overthrows the old power and places the Social-Democrats in government positions at the head of the State—constitutes proletarian revolution. The overthrow of the Hohenzollerns in Germany on November 7, 1918, was for them a real proletarian revolution, which, due to the peculiar circumstances that the old regime had been disorganized by warfare, made the victory attainable without difficulty. For the Communists this revolt could only be the beginning of the proletarian revolution, which, through the abolition of the old oppression opened the way for the working class, so that they could, through the creation of their own class organization, undermine the old forces. In reality, the workers, under the leadership of the Social-Democrats allowed and even aided, the building up of the old State power upon a firmer basis, after a moment of paralysis. They are still facing a period of hard struggle. For Kautsky and his friends Germany is a true Social-Democratic republic—Noske and his Imperial Guard (Reichswehr) are simply defects of beauty—a republic in which the working class aid in governing even if they do not rule. Most certain-

ly, they could not expect Socialism thus far. Kautsky had emphasized again and again that Social Revolution—according to the Marxist conception—will not come all of a sudden, but is a long historical process. Capitalism was not ripe for an industrial revolution. In other words, this would mean, that although the proletarian revolution took place, the proletariat should allow itself to be exploited, and then by degrees a suitably large industry would be nationalized. Or, in plainer language—in place of the old ministers at the head of the government, there are Social-Democrats, but capitalism with its exploitation remains. That is the real meaning of the Social-Democratic conception: after a single proletarian revolution arising there must follow in the footsteps of the Social Revolution a longer process of socialization. Communism takes the opposite view-point, maintaining that the proletarian revolution—the conquest of the state power and industry—is a long process of mass action, during which time the proletariat becomes mature and attains wisdom to govern itself, and the old state machinery is destroyed. At the turning point of this struggle, when the power is in the hands of the workers, there will be short work made of exploitation, the abolition of all claims to unearned revenue will be proclaimed, and on this new and just foundation will be constructed a new machinery—industrial machinery—an organized, systematic mechanism of production.

PROBLEMS OF THE THIRD INTERNATIONAL

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ing of thieves—they are a gathering of dastardly murderers.

They cannot evade the tribunal of the revolutionary workers.

6. Ramsay MacDonald gets away from the question of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat with a few words, as from the subject for a discussion about freedom and democracy.

No. It is high time to act. Discussions are too late.

The most dangerous—coming from the Berne "International"—is the lip-service recognition of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. (Italics ours. Ed.) These men are apt to recognize anything, to sign anything, in order to remain at the head of the working class movement. Kautsky already says that he is not opposed to the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. French social-patriots and "Centrists" also sign under the resolution for the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.

They do not deserve any confidence whatsoever. Not lip-service recognition is necessary, but the actual rupture with the policies of reformism, with the prejudices of bourgeois freedom, bourgeois democracy, the actual carrying on of the policies of the revolutionary class struggle.

They attempt to recognize the Dictatorship of the Proletariat in words, in order secretly to read into it the "will of the majority," "general suffrage" (Kautsky precisely is doing this thing) bourgeois parliamentarism, the refusal for the complete destruction of the bourgeois state machinery. We should guard ourselves against these new tricks, against these new lackeys of reformism more than anything else.

The Dictatorship of the Proletariat would be impossible if the majority of the population did not consist of proletarians and semi-proletarians. Kautsky & Co. attempt to falsify this truth by presenting the necessity of the "Vote of the Majority," in order to accept the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. (Italics ours. Ed.)

Comical pedants. They did not understand that generally not through the ballot, but through civil war are all the serious problems of politics decided at that time, when the Dictatorship of the Proletariat has been placed on the order of the day by history.

They did not understand that the Dictatorship of the Proletariat is the power of one class taking into its hands the whole apparatus, the whole machinery of the new state, conquering the bourgeoisie and neutralizing the whole petty-bourgeoisie and philistines and intelligentsia. **

The Kautskys and MacDonalds give lip-service recognition to the class-struggle, in order, in reality to forget about it in the next decisive moment in the history of the struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat: in the moment, when the proletariat, having captured the state power, and supported by the semi-proletariat and with the assistance of this power, the class struggle bring it eventually to the abolition of classes.

Like true philistines, the leaders of the Berne "Internationals" are repeating the bourgeois-democratic phrases about liberty, equality and democracy, not noticing, that they are repeating the obsolete merchant ideas of "free and equal," a id failing to understand that the proletariat needs the state not for "freedom," but for the suppression of his enemy, the exploiter and the capitalist. (Italics ours. Ed.)

The liberty and the equality of the merchant died, as did capitalism. Neither the Kautskys nor MacDonalds will be able to resurrect it.

The proletariat needs the abolition of classes—this is the real meaning of (freedom from the cracy, proletarian freedom (freedom from the capitalist and from the capitalist system) proletarian equality (not the equality of classes—a commonplace into which the Kautskys and MacDonalds fall, but the equality of workers, who are overthrowing capital and the capitalists).

So long as classes exist, the freedom and equality of classes is a bourgeois deception. The proletariat takes the power, becomes the ruling class, destroys bourgeois parliamentarism and bourgeois democracy, suppresses the bourgeoisie, suppresses all attempts of the other classes to return back to capitalism, gives real freedom and equality to the toiling masses (which can be realized only with the abolition of private ownership of the means of production) gives them not simply "rights," but the real use of what has been taken away from the bourgeoisie.

The one who does not understand this meaning of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat (or—what amounts to the same thing—of Soviet Power, or Proletarian Democracy),—accepts this word in vain.

I cannot develop here in more detail these ideas, expounded by me in the "State and Revolution" and in the brochure "Proletarian Democracy and the Renegade Kautsky." I may conclude by dedicating these notes to the delegates to the Luzerne Congress of August 10, 1919, of the Berne "International."

July 14, 1919.

* We call especial attention of our comrades to a remarkably deep thought contained in this paragraph. How many in our own ranks—of the former "Left Wingers" together with "Kautsky & Co. assumed the "same false position"... The whole position of the so-called "michiganites" and their followers, for instance, is based on this misconception. Editor.

** A Russian word, signifying "intellectuals" and professional people as a separate social group.