

Should Communists Participate in Reactionary Trade Unions?

By N. Lenin.

The German "Lefts" (Communisten Arbeiter Partei) after having considered this question, have definitely rejected the proposition of participation in reactionary trade union activities. They consider that mere denunciation and declamation against the reactionary, counter-revolutionary unions is sufficient. The bareness and futility of such participation by "revolutionary" communists in yellow social patriotic, reactionary, counter-revolutionary trade unions of England and Co. is emphasized by the "Left" Communist leader Horner more than by others.

Notwithstanding the certainty of the German "Lefts" that such tactics are revolutionary, they are, in reality, fundamentally erroneous and consist of but hollow phrases. In order to clarify this issue, I will take examples from our own experience.

The general plan of this article aims to adapt that part of our Russian experience which can be profitably applied to Western Europe and which is unavoidably in keeping with the history and contemporary tactics of Bolshevism.

The inter-relationships of leaders, parties, class, and mass, and the relations of the Dictatorship of the proletariat and the Communist Party to the trade unions is represented in Russia, at the present time, concretely in the following form. The Proletarian Dictatorship is realized through the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) which counts in its ranks, 611,000 members according to the latest reports of the ninth convention of the Party, held in April 1920. Before and after the November Revolution the membership fluctuated, and was much smaller even during 1918 and 1919. We fear the abnormal increase of the Party, for political and intellectual adventurers—who usually deserve to be shot—naturally attempt to insinuate themselves into the Party by cajolery and chicanery. The last time that we threw the doors of the Party wide open to the workingmen and peasants was in the winter of 1918 when Yudenitch was a few miles from Petrograd and Denikine reached Orel—250 versts from Moscow—that is when the Soviet Republic was menaced on all sides and in deadly danger. In these dark days, the careerists and other unreliable elements, did not join the Party because, instead of receiving responsible and remunerative positions, they would expect to be sent to the gallows and tortured by the counter-revolutionists.

The Communist Party meets annually in convention and is represented by one delegate for each 1000 members. It is headed by a Central Committee elected at the Convention and consisting of 19 members, while the current work is conducted by a still smaller group at Moscow, the Collegium—called the Organization and Political Bureau consisting of five members each, who are in turn elected by the plenary session of the C. E. C. No important political or organization question is decided by any State Institution of the Soviet Republic without the sanction of the C. E. C. of the Communist Party.

The Party in its work is directly supported by the trade unions which now count in their ranks, according to reports from their convention in April 1920 over four million members, and which are nominally independent of the Party. (Ed. note. The Russian trade-unions, according to latest reports in Izvestia, now number over five million members.) As a matter of fact, all the executive bodies of the vast majority of the trade-unions, and of the All-Russian Central Council of Trade Unions, are composed of Communist Party members who carry out all the instructions of the Party.

By this means, the Party maintains close contact with the working-class and the masses and out of nominally non-communist and flexible machinery is developed a broad and mighty proletarian apparatus through which, under the leadership and direction of the Communist Party, is realized the Dictatorship of the working class.

Without maintaining this close contact with the trade unions, without their active support, without their self-sacrifice and work, not only in the industries and economic reconstruction, but upon the military field it would be impossible to realize the Proletarian Dictatorship or to govern the country, not only for two and one half years, but for two and one half months.

It is obvious that in order to bring about this close contact with the trade unions and the masses, very arduous and intricate work of propaganda and agitation is necessary. Frequent and timely conferences with leading officials, are necessary, not only in connection with directing the masses but also to keep in touch with every influential and active man in all the trade unions. It also means a decisive conflict with the Mensheviks, who even now, tho small in number, exercise a certain influence. Their adherents are taught to use various methods of counter-revolutionary trickery,—beginning with the ideological defense of bourgeois

democracy; the preaching of "independence" of the trade-unions, i. e. making the unions independent of proletarian state power; culminating in sabotage and the destruction of proletarian discipline, etc., etc.

We do not consider that juncture with the masses through trade unions is itself sufficient. Conferences of workmen and peasants who have no political affiliation were created during the progress of the Revolution which the Communists seek to support, broaden, and develop into institutions through which we can keep in touch and understand the masses, answer their inquiries and develop from out of their ranks men fitted for government posts, etc.

The Peoples Commissariat of State Control was recently reorganized by decree into the Workers' and Peasants Bureaux of Inspection to which the conferences of non-partisan workers and peasants were invited to send delegates to participate in the elections of members to the state control commission created for the purpose of controlling the different departments.

It must be understood that the work of the Party is carried on through the Soviets, which unite all working masses, regardless of distinctions in trades or industries. The county conventions of Soviets are democratic institutions such as, even the best bourgeois parliamentary democracies have never conceived,—and through these Soviets, which are kept under the vigilance of the Party, and by assigning class conscious workers to all village posts, achieves for the proletariat the leading role in their relation to the peasantry and realizes the Dictatorship of the city Proletariat, through the constant conflict for the suppression of the rich, exploiting, speculating bourgeois peasantry.

All this is the general mechanism of the Proletarian State Power as examined by the leaders from the point of view of the practical realization of the Dictatorship. We trust that the reader will understand that the Russian Bolsheviks were familiar with this mechanism and watched it develop, during a period of twenty-five years, from illegal, underground, small circles to its present proportions. All the talk as to whether control should be exercised from above or from below, or as to whether there should be a dictatorship of the leaders or of the masses, etc. is as ridiculous as to ask whether a man's left foot is more essential to his body than his right arm.

It seems to us that the German Lefts are also involved in ridiculous childish absurdities in their grave and very learned and terrifically revolutionary chatter, as to the advisability of Communists carrying on their work within the reactionary trade unions, or of their refusal to so participate and to withdraw from them entirely and form obligatory, brand new, simon pure industrial unions. These workingmen's unions are very youthful and are the inventions of the "Left" Communists.

While Capitalism transmits a heritage to Socialism of century old craft and trade distinctions among the workers, it, at the same time brings out the trade unions which in time can and will develop broader industrial forms embracing whole industries and which will abolish all trade and craft distinctions and eventually bridging the gulf between intellectual and manual labor. The workers then become universally educated, trained and equipped to accomplish all their necessary tasks. Communism tends toward and must accomplish this, but through a long process of development. To go into raptures over this inevitable growth and to expect these industrial unions of themselves to grow into a full fledged and perfect Communist society is as criminally foolish as to expect a four year old girl to become a mother. At the best, this is ridiculous and puerile and at worst, a nasty crime.

We should and must begin to construct Communist society, not out of fantastic notions nor from artificially and man-created materials, but from such materials as are at hand and inherited from Capitalist society. It is self-evident that this a difficult task to accomplish, but any other means to achieve this end is pure circumvention and unworthy of serious consideration.

The trade unions in the early period of Capitalism represented a great advance by the working class, during the transition from their helpless and unorganized condition to the beginning of class unity. When a higher form of class unity of the proletariat begins to develop the revolutionary political party of the Proletariat would be unworthy of its name if it failed to understand how to connect their leaders with the working class and the masses in one integral whole.

It is inevitable that the trade unions will show reactionary craft narrowness and conservative pure and simple characteristics. But there could be no other process of development of the proletariat than through the trade unions and the reciprocal influence of the working class party.

The conquest of political power by the proletariat is a tremendous step forward. The mission of the Party is to educate the trade unions and to use new tactics instead of old ones to lead them, and at the same time to remember that the unions are and will be for a long time "schools of Communism" and preparatory schools for the realization of the Proletarian Dictatorship. These unions are necessary to achieve the solidarity of the workers in order to take over the administration of all the industries of the entire country by the individual trade or industrial unions.

Even under the Proletarian Dictatorship some forms of reaction are unavoidable within the trade unions. Not to understand this means not to have the slightest conception of the fundamental conditions obtaining in the transition period from Capitalism to Communism. To fear this backwardness of the trade unions, to attempt to circumvent it, to try to escape it is nonsensical and indicates a lack of faith in the role which the proletarian vanguard must assume as the instructor, the leader, and the beacon which attracts to the new life the lowest strata and the backward elements of the masses, the working class and peasantry. To postpone, however, the realization of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, until the last reactionary trade unionist or workman relinquishes his craft or trade union bias, would be a profound mistake

The art of politics, the proper understanding by Communists of their problems, consisting in correctly considering and discounting the conditions and the moment when the proletarian vanguard may successfully conquer political power; to be able to immediately obtain sufficient support from all strata of the working class and from the non-proletarian elements of the laboring masses, and afterward to be able to safeguard and maintain their power and to extend it, educating, leading and attracting the whole laboring masses.

Furthermore, in countries more advanced than in Russia, the reactionary tendencies in the trade unions are naturally more pronounced more conspicuous than in our country. In Russia, the Mensheviks had (and to some extent still have in a very few trade unions) the support of the trade unions due to trade narrowness and opportunism and craft exclusiveness. The Mensheviks of the western countries have a greater influence in the ranks of the trade unions because these unions are dominated by a more powerful element of labor aristocracy, who uphold trade union narrowness and the self-interest and sordidness of these petty bourgeois inspired imperialistic trade unions whose leaders are corrupted and bribed by the capitalist imperialists. These statements cannot be successfully contradicted. The struggle with the Comperes, Jouhaux's, Hendersons, Merrhells, Legiens et al., in western Europe and America, is much severer than the conflict with our own Mensheviks who represent a more homogeneous social and political type.

This struggle must be carried on without compromise and these reactionary and incorrigible social patriotic, opportunist leaders must be exposed, discredited and expelled in disgrace from the trade unions. It is impossible to conquer political power, nor should we attempt to take over political power until this fight has been waged up to a certain degree. In different countries and in different circumstances, the degree to which the fight should be carried is not always identical. These conditions can be carefully appraised only by trained, thoughtful and experienced political leaders of the proletariat of each country.

In Russia, for example, the criterion of success in this conflict was determined by the elections to the Constituent Assembly in November 1917—a few days after the proletarian uprising of October 25, 1917. In these elections, the Mensheviks were overwhelmingly defeated, receiving 700,000 votes (including trans-Caucasia—1,400,000 votes) as against 9,600,000 votes received by the Bolsheviks. (See my article on the Elections to the Constituent Assembly and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.)

(to be continued)

Resolution by the Polish Branch of U. C. P. Camden, N. J.

Received October 10th, 1920

Resolution

We, members of the Polish Branch of the U. C. P. of Camden, N. J., after the report given to us by the delegate to the Polish Federation convention, and explanations of the district organizer of U. C. P. of A., declare:

That after our acquaintance with the U. C. P. program and the reasons of the split, we came to the conclusion that we were misled, therefore we unanimously decide to join the Polish Federation and the U. C. P. of A. as the only revolutionary party in this country.

Organizer: John Grossy.