

The «Third Period» of the Comintern's Mistakes

What is Radicalization of the Masses?

By L. D. Trotsky

The radicalization of the masses for the Comintern has become, at present, a bare catechism and not the characterization of a process. Genuine Communists—teaches l'Humanité—should recognize the leading role of the party and the radicalization of the masses. It is meaningless to put the question that way. The leading role of the party is an unshaken principle for every Communist. Who does not follow it can be an anarchist or a confusionist, but not a Communist, that is, a proletarian revolutionist. But radicalization itself is not a principle, but only a characterization of a state of the masses. Is this characterization correct or is it not correct for the given period? That is a question of fact. In order to estimate seriously the state of the masses, correct criteria are necessary. What is radicalization? How does it express itself? What are its characteristics? With what tempo and in which direction does it develop? The deplorable leadership of the French Communist party does not even pose these questions. At most an official article or a speech will refer to the growth of strikes. But even there only bare figures are given, without serious analysis, without even a simple comparison with the ones of the preceding years.

Such an attitude to the question follows not only from the unfortunate decisions of the Tenth Plenum of the E. C. C. I. but, as a matter of fact from the very program of the Comintern. It speaks of the radicalization of the masses as a continuous process. It believes: today the mass is more revolutionary than it was yesterday, and tomorrow it will be more revolutionary than it is today. Such a mechanical idea does not correspond with the real process of development of the proletariat and of capitalist society as a whole. But does correspond, as perfectly as possible, with the mentality of the Cachins, Monmousseaus and the other frightened opportunists.

The social democratic parties, especially before the war, had imagined the future as a continual growth of social democratic votes, which will grow till it comes to the very moment of the complete possession of power. For a vulgar or pretended revolutionary this perspective still remains, essentially, its force, only instead of continuous growth of votes, he talks of the continual radicalization of the masses. This mechanical conception is sanctioned also by the Bucharin-Stalin program of the Comintern. It goes without saying that from the point of view of our epoch as a whole the development of the proletariat goes in the direction of the revolution. But this is not at all a straight process, just as the objective process of the sharpening of capitalist antagonism is not straight. The reformists see only the ups of the capitalist road. The formal "revolutionists" see only its downs. But a Marxist sees the line as a whole, with all its conjunctural rises and declines, without for a moment losing sight of its main direction—to the catastrophes of wars, to the outburst of revolutions.

The political feelings of the proletariat are far from changing automatically in one and the same direction. The rising of the class struggle are followed by its fallings, the flood-tides by the ebbs, depending upon complicated combinations of material and ideological conditions, internal and international. The activity of the masses, if not utilized at the right moment, or used wrong, goes to its opposite and ends in a period of decline, from which the masses recover faster or slower, again due to the influence of new objective stimuli. The characteristic of our epoch is the especially sharp changes of different periods, the extraordinary abrupt turns in the situation and this puts upon the leadership unusual obligations in the matter of correct orientation.

The activity of the masses, even when it is quite correctly ascertained, may have different expressions depending upon different conditions. The mass may, at certain periods, be completely absorbed in

an economic struggle, and show very little interest in political questions. On the other hand, suffering from a series of failures on the field of the economic struggle, the mass may abruptly transfer its attention to the realm of politics. But here too—depending upon a series of conditions and on the experience with which a mass entered these conditions—its political activity may go either by the purely parliamentary way or by way of extra-parliamentary struggle.

We take only a very few examples, which characterize the contradictions of the revolutionary development of the proletariat. Those who know how to follow facts and understand their meaning, will admit without difficulty that the variations traced above are not some kind of theoretical combination but an expression of the living international experience of the last decade.

In any case, it is clear from what has been said that when the radicalization of the masses is being discussed, a concrete definition of it should be demanded. The Marxist Opposition should, of course, put the same demand to itself. A bare denial of radicalization brings just as little as its complete affirmation. We should have an estimate of that which is and of that which is becoming.

The Strike Curve in France

The official leaders speak of the radicalization of the French working class almost exclusively in connection with the strike movement. The growth of the latter is an incontestable fact, systematically established. We will take this fact as a starting point.

The official statistic of strikes in France are always extraordinarily late. The last report of the Ministry of Labor on strikes ends with the year 1925. For 1926 I have not data at my disposal. For the next three years there is the data of the Communist press. There is absolutely no doubt that the figures taken from the two sources mentioned are incommensurable. It is doubtful if the Ministry of Labor registers all strikes with the necessary completeness. On the other hand, the superficial "revolutionists" of l'Humanité have an obvious tendency to give exaggerated data. But in spite of that the general tendency of the movement comes out clearly enough.

The strike movement in France reached its highest point in the first two years after the war. In 1919, 2,100 strikes took place in which 1,200,000 workers participated. In 1920, there were 1,900 strikes, in which almost 1,500,000 workers were involved. As to the number of strikers, this is the year of its high point. With the year 1921 there begins—with one small exception which will be mentioned later—a systematic decline, which reaches its lowest point in the years 1926-27. Here are the figures in round numbers: 1921: 450,000 strikers, that is, one-third of the number in the preceding year. In 1922: 300,000 strikers. Only in 1923 does the curve not decline but even rises slightly and shows 365,000 strikers. This episodic rise was undoubtedly due to the events connected with the occupation of the Ruhr and the revolutionary movement in Germany. In 1924, the number of strikers goes down to 275,000. For 1926, as already said, we have no data. For 1927 we have only the total number of strikes: there were only 230 of them, while in the years 1919-1925 the number of strikes varied between 570 and 2,100. Although the number of strikes is a rather crude index, still it does not leave room for doubt that the curve of strikes continued, in general, to fall, beginning from 1921 and including 1927. In the last quarter of 1927, there were 93 strikes with 70,000 strikers. Supposing that the number of strikes was the same on the average during the whole year, (an obviously arbitrary supposition), we will have approximately 170,000 for 1927, a number which is exaggerated rather than understated.

In 1928, the Communist press counts about 800 strikes, about 600 of which belong to the second half of the year, with 363,000 participants. Consequently it is possible to adopt, for the whole year of 1928, a hypothesis of 400,000 to 450,000 strikers. The same press shows 1,200 strikes

for 1929 with approximately the same number of participants as in 1928 (that is, 400,000 to 450,000). Thus, in comparison with the preceding year there is no rise. The number of strikers in 1928, as also in 1929, is about twice as big as in 1925. It is nearly the same as the number of strikers in 1921: It is three to three and a half times less than in 1920.

All these figures, as has already been noted above, do not pretend to be absolutely exact, but they are enough to define the dynamics of the process. After the high point of strikes in 1919-20, the diminishing progression takes place until 1923, with a very small break in 1923. In the years of 1923-29 we observe an unmistakable, and, what is more, a considerable increase of the strike movement, connected it is not hard to understand—it will be shown further on—with the rise in industry under the influence of the stabilization of the currency.

We can say with perfect confidence that the period of 1919-27 forms a certain independent cycle in the life of the French proletariat, including the cyclonic rise of the strike movement immediately after the war, as well as its defeats and its decline especially acute after the catastrophe in Germany in 1923. In the most general of its aspects this cycle is characteristic not only of France alone, but of the whole of Europe, and in considerable degree, the whole world. What is characteristic of France as such is the comparatively moderate extent of fluctuation between the highest and lowest points of the cycle: victorious France did not go through a genuine revolutionary crisis. In the rhythm of the French strike movement the gigantic events developing in Russia, Germany, England, and other countries found only a weakened reflection.

The same tendencies of the strike movement of the French workers are indicated by other data. The number of strikers and the number of days of each strike, fell sharply beginning with the year 1922. In 1921 each strike had an average of 800 strikers and lasted more than 14,000 days. In 1925 each strike already had less than 300 strikers and a little more than 2,000 days. We can assume that in 1926-27, these averages did not in any case, grow bigger. In 1929, we already have 400 men per strike.

We shall note another important index, which we shall need later. In the post-war years, the first place among the strikers belonging mainly to the miners the last two years, the first place is occupied by the textile workers and, in general, by the so-called light industry.

What do the Data of the Statistics Show?

Do they confirm the thesis of the radicalization of the masses or do they refute it? First of all, we answer, it takes it out of the realm of abstractions in which Monmousseau says Yes and Chambelland says No, without giving any definition of what is meant by radicalization. The data of the strike struggle given above are indisputable proof of certain moves in the working class. At the same time, they give a very important estimate of the number and quality of these moves. They outline the general dynamics of the process and make it possible, to a certain degree to anticipate the tomorrow, or more exactly, the possible variations of the tomorrow.

In the first place, we can affirm that the data for 1928-29, compared with the preceding period, characterize the beginning of a new cycle in the life of the French proletariat. They give us the right to assume that deep molecular processes have taken and are taking place in the masses, as a result of which the inert force of the decline begins—if only on the economic front for the present—to be overcome.

Nevertheless, the same data show that the growth of the strike movement is still very modest, and does not in the least give a picture of a tempestuous overflow, which would allow us to draw conclusions about a revolutionary or at least a pre-revolutionary period. In particular, there is no marked difference between 1928 and 1929. In the front rank of the strike movement, there still stand, as

was mentioned above, only the establishments of light industry. From this fact, Chambelland comes to a general conclusion against radicalization. It would be a different matter, he says, if strikes were taking hold of the large enterprises in heavy industry and the machine shops. In other words, he imagines that radicalization falls from the sky ready made. As a matter of fact these figures testify not only that the new cycle of proletarian struggle has begun, but also that this cycle is now only passing through its first stage. After defeat and decline, a revival, in the absence of any great events, could only start in no other way than from the industrial periphery, that is, from the light industries, from the secondary branches, from the smaller establishments of heavy industry. The transfer of the strike movement into the metal industry, machine shops, and transportation, would mean its transition to a higher stage of development, and would signify not only the symptoms of the beginning of a movement but the fact of a decisive break in the mood of the working class. It has not come yet. But it would be absurd to shut our eyes to the first stage of the movement only because the second has not begun yet or the third, or the fourth. Pregnancy even in its second month is pregnancy. To force it may lead to a miscarriage. But it is possible to arrive at the same result by ignoring it. It may be well, though, to add to this analogy that in the social realm dates are by no means as stable as in the realm of physiology.

Facts and Phrases

In discussing the question of the radicalization of the masses, it should not for a moment be forgotten that the proletariat attains its "monolithism" only in periods of the highest revolutionary flood tide. In the conditions of "every day life" in capitalist society, the proletariat is far from being homogeneous. Moreover, the heterogeneity of its layers manifests itself most acutely precisely at the turning points in the road. The most exploited, the least skilled, or the politically most backward layers of the proletariat are frequently the first to enter the arena of struggle, and, in case of failure, are often the first to desert it. It is exactly in the new period that those groups which did not suffer defeats in the preceding period are easily attracted to the movement, if only because they did not generally take part in big fights. In one way or another, these phenomena are bound to appear also in France.

The same fact is shown by the indissolution of the organized French workers which is pointed out by the official Communist press. Yes, the organized workers have their inhibitions too well developed. Considering themselves an insignificant part of the proletariat the organized are often apt to play a conservative role. It is not, of course, an argument against organization, but an argument against its weaknesses, and an argument against those trade union leaders of the type of Monmousseau, who do not understand the nature of trade union organization and are not able to guarantee it a proper place in the working class. But, in any case, for the given moment the vanguard role of the unorganized testifies that the question is not as yet about a revolutionary, but about a joint-economic struggle, and that, moreover, in its elementary stage.

The same thing is demonstrated by the important role of the foreign born workers in the strike struggle, who—by the way—will in the future play in France a part analogous to that of the Negroes in the United States. But that is in the future. At present, the part played in strikes by the foreigners who often do not know the language, is another proof of the fact that it is not a question of political but economic struggle, to which an impetus has been given by the change in the economic conjuncture.

Even in relation to the purely economic front, one cannot speak of the offensive character of the struggle, as Monmousseau and company do. They base this definition on the fact that a considerable percentage of the strikes are conducted in the name of increased wages. The thoughtful leaders forget that such a form of demands is forced upon the workers on the one hand by the rise of prices

*The official central organ of the French Communist Party. What comrade Trotsky writes about it applies with little if any change to the official press of the Stalinists in other countries, the Daily