

The «Third Period» of the Comintern's Mistakes

Crises of Conjuncture and the Revolutionary Crisis in Capitalism

At the Fifth Congress of the Confederation General du Travail Unitaire, A. Vassart made a lengthy speech against Chambelland*, which was later published as a pamphlet, with a foreword by Jean Brecot**. In his speech, Vassart attempts to defend the revolutionary perspective against the reformist perspective. In this respect, our sympathies are entirely on his side. But unfortunately he defends the revolutionary perspective with such arguments as can bring only advantages to the reformists. In his speech, there is included a series of fatal theoretical and factual mistakes. One may object: Are there so few mistaken speeches in the world? Vassart can still learn a great deal. I myself would be glad to think so. But it has been made difficult by the fact that the speech has been published in the form of a propaganda pamphlet. It is provided with a foreword by Jean Brecot who is at least a cousin to Monmousseau himself, and this gives the pamphlet a programmatic character. The fact that not only the author, but also the editor who prepared it for publication, did not perceive the enormous mistakes is witness to the sad state of the theoretical level of the present leaders of French Communism. Jean Brecot does not tire of smashing the Marxist Opposition. What he ought to do, as we shall soon demonstrate, is simply to sit down and study his A. B. C. S. Leadership of the labor movement is incompatible with ignorance, as Marx once said to Weitling.

At the congress, Chambelland expressed the superficial thought—based decisively on nothing but the reformist tendencies of the speaker—that capitalist stabilization will last for about another thirty-four years, that is, that even the new generation of the proletariat which is just coming forward cannot count upon the revolutionary seizure of power. Chambelland brought no serious arguments to substantiate his fantastic period of time. Whereas, the historical experience of the past two decades and the theoretical analysis of the present situation speak wholly against Chambelland's perspective.

But let us see how Vassart refutes him. He proves first of all that even before the war the capitalist system could not exist without convulsions. "From 1850 to 1910, an economic crisis took place approximately every 14 years (!?) bred by the capitalist system." (Page 14.) And further on: "If, before the war, the crisis took place every 14 years, we see a contradiction between this fact and the assertions of Chambelland who does not foresee a serious crisis before forty years." (Page 15).

It is not difficult to understand that with this sort of argument, Vassart, who confuses crises of conjuncture with the revolutionary crisis of capitalism as a whole, only strengthens the false position of Chambelland.

First of all, the establishment of the conjuncture cycle at 14 years is rather surprising. Where did Vassart get this figure? We hear it for the first time. And how is it that Jean Brecot, who instructs us so authoritatively, (almost as authoritatively as Monmousseau himself) did not notice such a gross mistake, especially in such a question that has such an immediate, such a vital significance for the trade union movement? Prior to the war, every trade unionist knew that crises or at least depressions recurred every seven or eight years. If we take the period of a century and a half, we find that one crisis was never separated from the other by more than eleven years. The average duration of the cycle was about eight and a half years, and furthermore, as was shown by the pre-war period, the conjuncture rhythm had a tendency not to slacken but to accelerate, which is bound up with the renewal of technical machinery. In the post-war years, the changes of con-

junction had a disorderly character, which was expressed by the fact that the crises recurred more frequently than before the war. How does it happen that leading French trade unionists do not know such elementary facts? Especially how can one lead a strike movement without having in mind a realistic picture of the changes of economic conjuncture? Every serious Communist can and must put this question to the leaders of the C. G. T. U., primarily to Monmousseau—and that squarely.

That is how the matter stands from the point of view of the facts... It is no better from the methodological point of view. What does Vassart actually prove? That capitalist development is generally inconceivable without conjuncture contradictions; they existed before the war and will exist in the future. It is doubtful if even Chambelland would deny this commonplace. But from this there does not as yet flow any revolutionary perspective. On the contrary: if for the past century and a half the capitalist world passed through eighteen crises, then there is no basis for the conclusion that capitalism must fall with the nineteenth or twentieth. In actuality, conjuncture cycles in the life of capitalism play the same role as is played, for example, by the cycles of blood circulation in the life of an organism. From the periodicity of the crises, there flows just as little the conclusion of the inevitability of the revolution, as the inevitability of death—from a rhythmic pulse.

At the Third Congress of the Comintern (1921), the ultra-Leftists of the time (Bucharin, Zinoviev, Radek, Thaelmann, Thalheimer, Pepper, Bela Kun and others) calculated that capitalism would never again know an industrial revival because it had entered the final ("Third") period, which would develop on the basis of a permanent crisis until the very revolution. Around this question, a big ideological struggle took place at the Third Congress. My report was devoted to a considerable extent to proving the idea that in the epoch of imperialism the laws determining the change in industrial cycles remain in effect and that conjuncture vacillations will be characteristic of capitalism as long as it exists: the pulse ceases only with death. But from the state of the pulse, in conjunction with other symptoms, a doctor can determine whether he is dealing with a strong or weak organism, a healthy or a sick one. (Of course, I do not speak of doctors of the Monmousseau school.) Vassart however makes the attempt to prove the inevitability and proximity of the revolution on the basis of the fact that crises and booms take place every 14 years.

Vassart could easily have avoided these gross errors if he had at least made a study of the report and discussion at the Third Congress of the Comintern. But, unfortunately, the most important documents of the first four Congresses, when genuine Marxist ideology ruled the Comintern, are now prohibited literature. For the new generation of leaders, the history of Marxist thought begins with the Fifth Congress, particularly with the unfortunate Tenth Plenum of the E. C. C. I. The principal crime of the dull and blind bureaucratic apparatus consists in the mechanical interpretation of theoretical traditions.

Economic Conjuncture and Radicalization of the Masses

If Vassart does not know the mechanics of business cycles and does not understand the relationship between conjuncture crises and revolutionary crises of the capitalist system as a whole, then the dialectical interdependence of the economic conjuncture and the struggle of the working class is just as unclear to him. Vassart conceives this dependence just as mechanically as his opponent Chambelland, although their conclusions are directly contrary, and moreover erroneous to the same degree.

Chambelland says: "Radicalization of the masses is in a certain sense the barometer which makes it possible to evaluate the condition of capitalism in a given country. If capitalism is in a state of decline the masses are necessarily radicalized." (Page 23.) From this Chambelland draws the conclusion that because the strikes embrace only the periphery of the

workers, because metallurgical and chemical industries are affected only to a slight degree, capitalism is not as yet in decline. Before him there is still a forty years' period of development.

What does Vassart answer to this? Chambelland, according to him, "does not see the radicalization because he does not see the new methods of exploitation." (Page 20.) Vassart in every respect repeats the thought that if one recognizes the intensified exploitation and understands that it will develop further, "that in itself compels you to reply affirmatively to the question of the radicalization of the masses." (Page 31.)

When one reads these polemics, he gets the impression of two blind-folded men trying to catch each other. It is not true that a crisis always and under all circumstances radicalizes the masses. Example: Italy, Spain, the Balkans, etc. It is not true that the radicalism of the working class necessarily corresponds with the period of capitalism's decline. Example: Chartism in England, etc. Like Chambelland, Vassart also ignores the living history of the labor movement in the name of dead forms. Wrong also is Chambelland's conclusion itself: From the fact, that strikes have not as yet embraced the main mass of French workers, one must by no means deduce a denial of the beginning of radicalization; but what can and must be arrived at is a concrete evaluation of the extent, depth and intensity of this radicalization. Chambelland, evidently, agrees to believe in it only after the whole working class is engaged in an offensive. But such leaders who wish to start only when everything is ready, are not needed by the working class. One must be able to see the first, even though weak, symptoms of revival, while only in the economic sphere, adapt one's tactics to it and attentively follow the development of the process. Meantime one must not disregard, even for an hour, the general nature of our epoch, which has proved more than once and will yet prove, that between the first symptoms of revival and stormy upsurge which creates a revolutionary situation, not forty years but perhaps only a fifth or a tenth of that are required.

This matter stands no better with Vassart. He simply establishes a mechanical parallel between exploitation and radicalization. How can the radicalization of the masses be denied, Vassart says irritably, if exploitation grows from day to day? This is childish metaphysics, quite in the spirit of Bucharin. Radicalization must be proved not by deductions but by facts. The conclusion of Vassart can be turned into its opposite without difficulty. It is sufficient to put a question like this: How could the capitalists increase exploitation from day to day if they were confronted by the radicalization of the masses? It is precisely the absence of fighting spirit in the masses that permits an increase of exploitation. True, such reasoning without qualifications would also be one-sided, but still a lot nearer to life than Vassart's constructions.

The trouble is that the growth of exploitation does not under all circumstances raise the fighting spirit of the proletariat. Thus, with a declining conjuncture, with the growth of unemployment, particularly after lost battles, increased exploitation does not breed radicalization of the masses, but quite the contrary, the falling of spirit, dispersal and disintegration. We saw, that, for example, in the English coal mining industry right after the strike of 1926. We saw it on a still larger scale in Russia when the industrial crisis of 1907 fell with the wrecking of the 1905 revolution. If in the past two years the growth of exploitation in France brought about the evident growth of the strike movement, the ground for it was created by the rise in the economic conjuncture and not its decline.

False Revolutionaries Fear Economic Processes

But the ultra-Left opportunists leading the Comintern fear a rise in industry as economic "counter-revolution". Their radicalism leans on a weak reed. For the further rise of industry, business conjuncture would in the very first place have delivered a mortal blow to their stupid theo-

ries of the "third and last period". These people deduce revolutionary perspectives not from the real process of contradictions but from false schemas. And from this flow their fatal mistakes in tactics.

It may seem quite improbable that at the Congress of the C. G. T. U. in France the official orators tried above all to depict the affairs of French capitalism in the most piteous form. Loudly exaggerating the present swing of the strike movement, the French Stalinists at the same time gave such a characterization of French industry as would make strike struggles absolutely hopeless in the future. Among them was Vassart. Precisely because he, together with Monmousseau, does not distinguish between the crisis of capitalism and the conjuncture crisis, and figures this time together with Chambelland, that a conjuncture rise might further remove the revolution to a period of decades, Vassart is apprehensive of an industrial rise. On page 21-24 of his pamphlet, he proves that the present industrial revival in France is "artificial" and "momentary" (page 24). At the December national committee meeting, Richetat diligently painted the French textile industry as being in a state of crisis. If this is the case it means that the strike movement which so far served as the only indication of radicalization has no economic foundation under itself or is losing it rapidly. To say the least, by anticipation Vassart and Richetat give the representatives of capital a priceless argument against economic concessions to the workers and what is more important they give decisive arguments to the reformists against economic strikes, for it must be understood that from a perspective of chronic crisis one can by no means draw a perspective of increasing economic struggles.

Do not these sorry-syndicalists follow the economic press? But, they may say, the capitalist press deliberately parades its optimism. However, it is not a question of editorials here. From day to day, from month to month, the press publishes the market reports, the balances of the banks, commercial and industrial enterprises and railroads. Some of the totals involved have already been printed in No. 12 of *Verite*. The more recent figures are further proof of the rising tendency of French industry. The last economic weekly to reach me, *Le Temps* (October 9, 1929), carries for instance, a report of a general meeting of the stockholders of the metallurgical enterprises of the North and East of France. We do not know M. Quivelette's attitude to the philosophy of the "Third Period" and we admit that we are not very much interested. But nevertheless he can very well sum up profits and cut dividends. Quivelette sums up the total of the past year in the following phrase: "The condition of the domestic market has been exceptionally favorable." This formula, I hope, has nothing in common with platonic optimism because it is strengthened by forty franc dividends on stock instead of the twenty-five franc franc dividend the year before. We ask: Has or has not this fact an importance for the economic struggles in the metal industry? It would seem that it has. But unfortunately, behind the back of Quivelette we see the figures of Vassart and Brecot or that of Monmousseau himself, and we hear their voice: "Don't believe the words of this capitalist optimist who does not know that he is up to his ears in the third period!" Isn't it clear that if a worker makes the mistake of believing on this question, Monmousseau and not Quivelette, he will have to come to the conclusion that he has no ground under his feet for successful economic struggle, to say nothing of an offensive.

The Monmousseau school—if one may

*We can only welcome the fact that *La Verite* has introduced monthly economic reviews. The first article (No. 12) gives an excellent outline for the need of economic orientation for every Communist in the Party as well as in the trade union work. Particularly the Oppositionists must rely on this side of the matter: the establishment of a correct revolutionary perspective, based on a Marxist analysis of facts and figures, not only in opposition to the empty babblings of Cachin and Monmousseau, but also to the political fiction of some gentlemen who have wandered into the ranks of the Opposition by mistake.

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