

The «Third Period» of the Comintern's Mistakes

Where are the Symptoms of the Political Radicalization of the Masses?

The question of the radicalization of the masses is not exhausted, however, with the strike movement. How do matters stand with the political struggle? And above all: how do matters stand with the numbers and influence of the Communist Party?

It is remarkable that in speaking of radicalization the official leaders, with a striking light-mindedness, ignore the question of their own party. Meanwhile, the facts are that beginning with 1925 the membership of the party has been falling from year to year: in 1925, 83,000 members; 1926, 65,000; 1927, 56,000; 1928, 52,000; 1929, 35,000. For the past years, we use the official figures of the secretary of the Comintern, Platnitzky; for 1929, the figures of Semard. No matter how these figures are regarded, they are undoubtedly highly exaggerated. As a whole, they very vividly present the curve of the party's decline: in five years, the membership fell by more than half. It may be said that quality is more important than quantity, and that there now remain in the party only the fully reliable Communists. Let us assume that. But this is not at all the question. The process of the radicalization of the masses can by no means signify the isolation of the cadres, but on the contrary, the influx into the party of reliable and semi-reliable members and the conversion of the latter into "reliables." The political radicalization of the masses can be reconciled with the systematic decrease in party membership only if one considers the role of the party in the life of the working class the same as a fifth wheel to a wagon. Facts are stronger than words: we observe a steady decline of the party not only during the years 1925-27, when the strike wave was ebbing, but also during the last two years, when the number of strikes was beginning to grow.

At this point, the honorable Panglosses* of official Communism will interrupt, pointing to the "disproportion" between the numbers of the party and its influence. This is now generally the formula of the Comintern, created by the shrewd for the simpleton. However, the canonized formula not only fails to explain anything but in some respects even makes matters worse. The experience of the labor movement testifies that the difference between the extent of organization and the extent of the influence of the party—all other conditions being equal—is all the greater the smaller the revolutionary and the bigger the "parliamentary" character of the given party. Opportunism is a lot easier than Marxism, is based on the diffused masses. This is especially evident from the simple comparison of the socialist and Communist Party**. The systematic growth of the "disproportion," with the decline in the numbers of organized Communists could consequently mean nothing but the fact that the French Communist Party is being transformed from a revolutionary into a parliamentary and municipal party. That this process to a certain degree took place in the last years, of that the recent "municipal" scandals are incontestable witness; and it may be feared that "parliamentary" scandals will follow. Nevertheless, the difference between the Communist party in its present form, and the socialist agency of the bourgeoisie, remains enormous. The Panglosses in the leadership merely slander the French Communist Party when they discourse on some kind of a gigantic disproportion between its numbers and its influence. It is not difficult to prove that the political influence

* Pangloss is Voltaire's classic character for whom everything is at its best in this "best of all possible worlds"—Ed.

** On the eve of the legislative elections of 1924, the president of the E. C. C. I. in a special appeal to the French Communist Party pronounced the Socialist Party of France as "non-existent". The call emanated from the light-winged Lozovsky. I protested in vain, in a letter addressed to the president, against this light-minded evaluation, explaining that a reformist-parliamentary party may retain a very wide influence with a weak organization and even a weak press. This was looked upon as my "pessimism". Naturally, the results of the 1924 elections, just as the entire further course of development this time also light-mindedness of Zinoviev Lozovsky.

By L. D. Trotsky

of Communism, unfortunately, has grown very little in the last five years.

For Marxists—it is no secret that parliamentary and municipal elections sharply distort, and—always to the detriment of revolutionary tendencies—change the actual mood of the suppressed masses. Nevertheless, the dynamics of political development find their reflection in parliamentary elections: this is one of the reasons why we Marxists take an active part in parliamentary and municipal struggles. But what do the figures of the election statistics show? In the legislative elections of 1924 the Communist party polled 875,000 votes, a little less than ten percent of the total electorate. In the elections of 1928, the party polled a little more than a million votes (1,064,000), which represented eleven and one third percent of the votes cast. Thus, the specific gravity of the party in the electoral body increased by one and one-third percent. If this process were to continue further at the same tempo, then the perspective of Chambelland with regards to thirty or forty years of "social peace" would appear too . . . revolutionary.

The socialist party, already "non-existent" in 1924 (according to Zinoviev-Losovsky) polled almost 1,700,000 votes in 1928, more than eighteen percent of the total, or more than one and a half times the Communist votes.

The results of the municipal elections change the whole picture very little. In some industrial centers (Paris, the North) the winning away, of votes from the socialists by the Communists undoubtedly took place. Thus, in Paris the specific gravity of the Communist vote increased in four years (1925-29) from 18.9 percent to 21.8 percent, that is, by three percent, at a time when the socialist vote fell from 22.4 percent to 18.1 percent, that is, by four percent. The symptomatic significance of such facts is undeniable: but so far they have only a local character, and are strongly discredited by that anti-revolutionary "municipalism" personified by Louis Sellier and other petty bourgeois like him. Generally, the municipal elections that took place a year after the legislative elections did not bring about any real changes as a result of the Selliers.

Other indications of political life speak just as fully against, to say the least, premature parrottings on the so-called political radicalization of the masses, which is to have taken place in the last two years. The circulation of *L'Humanite*, to our knowledge, has not grown in the past two years. The collections of money for *L'Humanite* undoubtedly represent a gratifying fact. But such collections would have been considerable, in view of the demonstrative attack of reaction on the paper, a year, two and three ago as well.

On the First of August—it must not be forgotten for a minute—the party was incapable of mobilizing not only that part of the proletariat which voted for it but not even all the unionized workers. In Paris, according to the undoubtedly exaggerated accounts of *L'Humanite*, about fifty thousand workers participated in the First of August demonstrations. That is, less than half of the unionized. In the provinces, matters stood infinitely worse. This fact proves, be it noted in passing, that the "leading role" of the Political Bureau among the C. G. T. U. apparatus men does not at all mean the leading role of the party among the unionized workers. But the latter contain only a tiny fraction of the class. If the revolutionary rise is such an irrefutable fact then what good is a party leadership which, in the acute moment of the Soviet-Chinese conflict, could not bring out an anti-imperialist demonstration even a quarter (more correctly stated, even a tenth) part of its electorate in the country. No one demands the impossible of the leadership of the party. A class cannot be seduced. But what gave the August First demonstration the character of a flat failure is the monstrous "disproportion" between the victorious shouts of the leadership and the real echo of the masses. So far as the trade union organizations are concerned, they went through the party's decline—judging by the official figures—after a delay of one year. In 1926, the C. G. T. U. numbered 475,000 members. In 1927, 452,000. In 1928, 375,000. The loss of 100,000 members by the trade unions at a time when the strike struggles in the country increased, represents an irrefutable proof that the C. G.

T. U. does not reflect the basic processes at work in the field of the economic struggles of the masses. As an enlarged shadow of the party, it merely experiences the decline of the latter after some delay.

The data cited in the present outline confirm with double strength the conclusions we made in a semi-priori order in the first article of the analysis of the strike movement figures. Let us recall them once more. The years 1919-20 were the culminating point of the proletarian struggle in France. After that, an ebb set in, which, in the economic field, began to change six years later by a new, but still slow tide: but in the political field the ebb-tide or stagnation continues even now, at any rate, in the main mass of the proletariat. Thus, the awakening of the activity of certain sections of the proletariat in the field of economic struggle, is irrefutable. But this process too is only passing through its first stage, when it is primarily the enterprises of light industry that are drawn into the struggle, with an evident preponderance of the unorganized workers over the organized and with a considerable specific gravity of the foreign-born workers.

The impetus to the strike struggles was the rise in the economic conjuncture, with a simultaneous rise of the cost of living. In its first stages the strengthening of economic struggles is not accompanied ordinarily with a revolutionary rise. It is not evident now either. On the contrary, the economic rise for a certain time may even weaken the political interests of the workers, at any rate, of some of its sections.

If we take further into consideration that French industry has been experiencing a stage of rise for two years now; that there is no talk of unemployment in the basic branches of industry and that in some branches there is even an acute shortage of workers, then it is not difficult to conclude that with these exceptionally favorable conditions for trade union struggle the present swing of the strike movement must be acknowledged as extremely moderate. The basic indications of this moderation are: the depression in the masses that still remains from the last period and the slowness of the industrial rise itself.

What Are the Immediate Perspectives?

Regardless of the rhythm of the conjuncture changes, it is only possible to foresee approximately the change in the phases of the cycle. What was said refers also to pre-war capitalism. But in the present epoch the difficulties of conjuncture prediction have multiplied. The world market has not attained, after the shake-up of the war, the establishment of a single conjuncture, even though it approached it appreciably compared to the first five years after the war. This is why one must now be doubly careful in attempting to determine beforehand the alternating changes in world conjuncture.

At the present moment the following basic variations appear likely:

1. The New York stock market crisis proves to be the forerunner of a commercial-industrial crisis in the United States, which reaches great depths in the very next months. United States capitalism is compelled to make a decisive turn toward the foreign market. An epoch of mad competition opens up. European goods retreat before this unrestrained attack. Europe enters a crisis later than the United States but as a result the European crisis assumes extraordinary acuteness.

2. The stock market crash does not immediately call forth a commercial-industrial crisis, but results only in a temporary depression. The blow at stock market speculation brings about better correlation between the course of paper values and commercial-industrial realities, just as between the latter and the real buying power of the market. After the depression and a period of adjustment, the commercial-industrial conjuncture rises upward once more, even though not as steeply as in the previous period. This variation is not excluded. The reserves of American capitalism are great. Not the last place among them is held by the government budget (orders, subsidies, etc.)

3. The withdrawal of funds from American speculation generates commercial and industrial activity. The further fate of

this revival will in turn depend just as much upon purely European as upon factors. Even in case of a sharp economic crisis in the United States, a rise may yet be maintained in Europe for a certain time, because it is unthinkable that capitalism in the United States will be able in the period of a few short months to reconstruct itself for a decisive attack on the world market.

4. Finally, the actual course of developments may pass between the above-outlined variations and yield an equivalent in the form of a shaky, broken curve with weak deviations upward or downward.

The development of the worker, particularly through the strike movement in the whole history of capitalism, has been closely bound with the development of the conjuncture cycle. It is not necessary, however, to conceive this connection mechanically. Under certain conditions that overflow the boundaries of the commercial-industrial cycle (sharp changes of the world economic or political environment, sharp social crises, wars and revolutions), it is not the current demands of the masses evoked by the given conjuncture that find their expression in the strike wave, but their deep historical tasks of a revolutionary character. Thus, for instance, the post-war strikes in France did not have conjuncture character but reflected the profound crisis of capitalist society as a whole. If we approach the present strike in France with this criterion, it will present itself primarily as a movement of conjuncture character; the course and tempo of the labor movement will depend in the most immediate sense on a further movement of the market, on alternating conjuncture phases, on their fullness and intensity. All the more impermissible is it, in a changeable moment such as we are now passing through, to proclaim the "third period" without any regard for the real course of economic life.

There is no need to explain that even in case of a renewal of the favorable conjuncture in America and the development of a commercial-industrial rise in Europe, the coming of a new crisis is entirely unavoidable. There is not the least doubt that when a crisis actually arrives, the present leaders will declare that their "prognosis" was fully justified, that the stabilization of capitalism proved its weakness, and that the class struggle took on a sharper character. It is clear, however, that such a "prognosis" costs very little. One who started to predict daily the eclipse of the sun would finally live to see his prediction fulfilled. But it is doubtful if we would consider such a prophet a serious astronomer. The task of the Communists is not to predict crises, revolutions and wars every single day, but to prepare for wars and revolutions, soberly evaluating the situation, the conditions which arise between wars and revolutions. It is necessary to foresee the inevitability of a crisis after a rise. It is necessary to warn the masses of the coming crisis. But to prepare them for the crisis will be more easily possible the more fully the masses under a correct leadership, utilize the period of rise. At the recent (December) Plenum of the national committee of the C.G.T.U., quite healthy thoughts were expressed. Thus, Claveri and Dorelle complained that the last C. G. T. U. congress (May 1929) evaded the question of economic demands of the working masses. The speakers, however, did not stop to think how it could happen that a trade union congress passed by that which should be its first and most urgent task. In accordance with the so-called "self-criticism", the main speakers this time condemned the C. G. T. U. leadership more thoroughly than the Opposition ever did.

However, Dorelle himself introduced not a little confusion in the name of the "third period", in connection with the question of the political character of the strikes. Dorelle demanded that the revolutionary trade unionists, that is, the Communists,—there are no other revolutionary trade unionists in existence at the present time—show the workers in every strike the dependence of isolated manifestations of exploitation upon the whole contemporary regime, and consequently the connection between the immediate demands of the workers and the task of the proletarian revolution. This is an ABC demand for Marxists. But by this is not at all determined the character of a strike as such. By a political strike

(Continued on Page 8)