

Centrism and the 4th International

Realignments in the International Labor Movement

1. The events in Austria, coming after the events in Germany, placed a final cross over "classic" reformism. Henceforth only the dullest leaders of British and American trade-unions and their French follower, Jouhaux, the president of the Second International, Vandervelde, and similar political schyphosuri will dare to speak openly of the perspectives of peaceful development, democratic reforms, etc. The overwhelming majority of reformists consoling take on new colors now. Reformism yields to the innumerable shadings of centrism which now dominate the field of the workers' movement in the majority of countries. This creates an entirely new, and in a sense unprecedented, situation for work in the spirit of revolutionary Marxism (Bolshevism). The New International can develop principally at the expense of the now prevailing tendencies and organizations. At the same time the revolutionary International cannot form itself otherwise than in a consistent struggle against centrism. Under these conditions ideological irreconcilability and the flexible policy of the united front serve as two weapons for the attainment of one and the same end.

Characteristics of Centrism

2. One must understand first of all the most characteristic traits of modern centrism. That is not easy: first, because centrism due to its organic amorphousness yields with difficulty to a positive definition; it is characterized to a much greater extent by what it lacks than by what it embraces, secondly, never has centrism yet played to such an extent as now with all the colors of the rainbow, because never yet have the ranks of the working class been in such ferment as at the present time. Political ferment, by the very essence of the term, means a realignment, a shift between two poles, Marxism and reformism; that is, the passing through various stages of centrism.

3. No matter how difficult a general definition of centrism, which of necessity always has a "conjunctural" character, nevertheless, we can and must bring out the outstanding characteristics and peculiarities of the centrism groupings originating from the break-down of the Second and the Third Internationals.

(a) Theoretically, centrism is amorphous and eclectic; so far as possible it evades theoretical obligations and inclines (in words) to give preference to "revolutionary practice" over theory, without understanding that only Marxism theory can impart revolutionary direction to practice.

Centrist Ideology

(b) In the sphere of ideology centrism leads a parasitic existence; it repeats against revolutionary Marxists the old Menshevik arguments (Martov, Axelrod, Plechanov) usually without suspecting this; on the other hand, its main arguments against the rights it borrows from the Marxists, that is first of all from the Bolshevik-Leninists, dulling however, the sharp edge of criticisms avoiding practical conclusions, thereby rendering their criticism meaningless.

(c) A centrist readily proclaims his hostility to reformism; but he does not mention centrism; moreover, he considers the very definition of centrism as "unclear," "arbitrary," etc.; in other words centrism does not like to be called by its name.

(d) A centrist, always uncertain of his position and his methods, views with hatred the revolutionary principle: to state what is; he is inclined to substitute for a principled policy personal maneuvering and petty organizational diplomacy.

(e) A centrist always remains in spiritual dependence on rightist groupings, is inclined to cringe before those who are more moderate, to remain silent on their opportunist sins and to color their actions before the workers.

(f) His shilly-shallying the centrist frequently covers up by reference to the danger of "sectarianism," by which he understands not abstract propagandist passivity (of the Bordist type) but an active concern for purity of principles, clarity of position, political consistency, organizational completeness.

(g) A centrist occupies a position between an opportunist and a Marxist somewhat analogous to that which a petty bourgeois occupies between a capitalist and a proletarian: he kowtows before the first and has contempt for the second.

On the International Arena

(h) On the international arena the centrist distinguishes himself if not by blindness then by shortsightedness; he does not understand that in the present epoch a national revolutionary party can be built only as part of an international party; in the choice of his international allies the centrist is even less discriminating than in his own country.

(i) A centrist sees in the policy of the Comintern only "ultra-Left" deviations, adventurism, putschism, ignoring completely the right-oppor-

unist zig-zags (Kuo Min Tang, Anglo-Russian Committee, pacifist foreign policy, anti-Fascist bloc, etc.)

(j) A centrist swears readily by the policy of the united front, emptying it of its revolutionary content and transforming it from a tactical method into a supreme principle.

(k) A centrist readily resorts to pathetic moralizing to cover up his ideological emptiness; he does not understand that revolutionary morality can be formed only on the basis of revolutionary doctrine and revolutionary policy.

Words and Deeds

1. Under the pressure of circumstance the eclectic-centrist may accept even the most extreme conclusions only to retreat from them afterwards in practice. Having accepted the dictatorship of the proletariat he will leave a wide margin for opportunist interpretations; having proclaimed the necessity of a Fourth International he will work for the building of a Two-and-a-half International, etc.

2. The most malignant example of centrism is, if you wish, the German group "Begin Anew" (Neu Beginnen). Superficially repeating the Marxian criticism of reformism, it comes to the conclusion that all the misfortunes of the proletariat follow from splits and that salvation lies in the safeguarding of the unity of the social-democratic parties. These gentlemen place the organizational discipline of Wels and Co. higher than the historic interests of the proletariat. And since Wels & Co. subordinate the party to the discipline of the bourgeoisie, the group "Begin Anew" cloaked by left criticism stolen from the Marxists, represents in reality a harmful agency of the bourgeoisie order, even though an agency of second degree.

The London Bureau

3. The so-called London (now Amsterdam) Bureau represents an attempt at creating an international focal point for centrist eclecticism, under the banner of which the right and the left opportunist groupings, which dare not choose finally a direction and a banner, try to unite. In this as in other cases the centrists try to direct the movement obliquely along a diagonal course. The elements composing the bloc pull in opposite directions; the N. A. P. (Norwegian Workers Party) cautiously moves towards the Second International; the I. L. P. (Independent Labor Party)—partly toward the Third, partly toward the Fourth; the S. A. P. (Socialist Workers Party of Germany) and the O. S. P. (Independent Socialist Party of Holland)—veering and vacillating—toward the Fourth. Exploiting and preserving the ideological amorphousness of all its participants and trying to compete in the work for the creation of a new International, the bloc of the "London Bureau" plays a reactionary role. The failure of this reaction is absolutely inevitable.

Bureaucratic Centrism

4. The defining of the policy of the Comintern as that of bureaucratic centrism retains its full force now too. As a matter of fact, only centrism is capable of constant leaps from opportunist betrayals to ultra-Left adventurism; only the power-few Soviet bureaucracy could for ten years assure a stable base for the ruinous policy of zig-zags.

Bureaucratic centrism, in distinction from centrist groupings which crystallized out of the social democracy, is the product of the degeneration of Bolshevism; it retains—in caricature form—some of its traits, still leads a considerable number of revolutionary workers, disposes of extraordinary material and technical means, but by its political influence is now the crassest, most disorganizing and harmful variety of centrism. The political break-down of the Comintern, clear to the whole world, signifies of necessity the further decomposition of bureaucratic centrism. In this sphere our task is to save the best elements for the cause of the proletarian revolution. Side by side with tireless principled criticism, our main weapon for influencing the workers still remaining under the banner of the Comintern is the further penetration of our ideas and methods into those wide masses, who stand now in overwhelming majority outside the influence of the Comintern.

5. Precisely now, when reformism is forced to renounce itself, transforming or dyeing itself into centrism, some groupings of Left centrism, on the contrary, stop short in their development and even move backwards. It seems to them that the reformists have already grasped almost everything, that it is only necessary not to play with exorbitant demands, criticism, extreme phraseology, and that then with one blow one can create a mass "revolutionary" party.

In reality, reformism, forced by events to disavow itself, having no clear program, no revolutionary tactics, is capable only of lulling the

advanced workers to sleep by inculcating in them the idea that the revolutionary regeneration of their party is already achieved.

New Forms of Struggle

6. For a revolutionary Marxist the struggle against reformism is now almost fully replaced by the struggle against centrism. The mere bare counter-posing of legal struggle to illegal, of peaceful means to violence, of democracy to dictatorship now goes beside the mark in the majority of cases because the frightened reformist, disavowing himself, is ready to accept the most "revolutionary" formulas if only they do not obligate him today to a decisive break with his own irresoluteness, indecision and expectant waiting. The struggle with hidden or masked opportunist must therefore be transferred chiefly to the sphere of practical conclusions from revolutionary requisites.

Before seriously accepting centrism's talk of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" we must demand a serious defense against Fascism, a complete break with the bourgeoisie, a systematic building of a workers' militia, its training in militant spirit, the creation of inter-party defense centres, anti-Fascist staffs, the banishment from their ranks of parliamentary, trade-unionist and other traitors, bourgeois lackeys, careerists, too. Precisely on this plane the main fights against centrism must now be fought. To carry on this struggle with success it is necessary to have free hands, that is, not only to retain full organizational independence, but also critical intransigence with regard to the most "left" offshoots of centrism.

Events Force Realignments

7. Bolshevik-Leninists in all countries must realize clearly the peculiarities of the new stage in the struggle for the Fourth International. The events in Austria and France give a powerful impetus to the realignment of the forces of the proletariat in the revolutionary direction. But precisely this universal supplanting of open reformism by centrism develops a powerful attractive force with regard to left centrist groupings (S. A. P., O. S. P.) which only yesterday were about to unite with the Bolshevik-Leninists. This dialectic process may produce the impression on the surface that the Marxian wing is again "isolated" from the masses. A flagrant delusion! The veerings of centrism to the right and to the Left follow from its very nature. There will yet be tens and hundreds of such episodes on our road. It would be the most wretched faint-heartedness to fear to go forward just because the road is strewn with obstacles or because not all the fellow travellers will arrive at the very end.

The Fourth International

Whether the new opportunist vacillations of our centrist allies

will prove conjunctural or final (in reality they will be of both kinds), the general conditions for the formation of the Fourth International on the basis of genuine Bolshevism because more and more favorable. The chase of the "extreme left" centrists after the simply lefts, of the lefts after the moderates, of the moderates after the rights, like the chase of a man after his own shadow, can not create any stable mass organization: the miserable experience of the German Independent Party (U. S. P.) retains now also its full force. Under the pressure of events, with the aid of our criticism and our slogans, the advanced workers will step over the vacillations of the most left centrist leaders, and, if it should become necessary, also over these very leaders. On the road to a new International the proletarian vanguard will find no other answers than those which have been elaborated and are being elaborated by the Bolshevik-Leninists on the basis of international experience during ten years of uninterrupted theoretical and practical struggle.

Conditions for Success

10. During the past year our political influence has greatly grown in a number of countries. We will be able to develop and broaden these successes in a comparatively short time under the following conditions:

(a) Not to outsmart the historic process, not to play hide and seek but to state what is;

(b) to give ourselves a theoretic accounting of the changes in the general situation which in the present epoch frequently take on the nature of sharp turns;

(c) to heed carefully the mood of the masses, without prejudices, without illusions, without self-deception in order on the basis of a correct estimate of the relationship of forces within the proletariat, to avoid opportunism as well as adventurism and to lead the masses forward, not to throw them back;

(d) every day, every hour to answer clearly to ourselves what our next practical step must be, tirelessly to prepare this step and on the basis of living experience explain to the workers the principled difference of Bolshevism from all other parties and currents;

The Basic Historic Task

(e) Not to confuse tactical tasks of a united front with the basic historic task; the creation of new parties and a new International;

(f) not to neglect even the weakest ally, for the sake of practical action.

(g) to watch critically the most "left" ally as a possible adversary.

(h) to treat with the greatest attention those groupings which actually gravitate to us; patiently and carefully to listen to their criticism, doubts and vacillations; to help them develop toward Marxism; not be frightened by their caprices, threats, ultimatums (centrists are always capricious and touchy); not to make any concessions to them in principle;

(i) and once more: not to fear to state what is.

February 23, 1934 —L. TROTSKY

Communism and the Intellectuals

1. Toward an Alliance of the Workers and Intellectuals

(Ed. Note.—This is the first of two discussion articles by one of the signers of the Open Letter to the Communist Party on the Madison Square Garden affair.)

1. Toward an Alliance of Intellectuals and Workers

As the immediate repercussions of the Madison Square Garden affair die down, it has become increasingly clear that at least on the intellectual front the landscape has been tremendously and permanently changed. Last week's Militant was right in appraising the Open Letter of 27 C. P. sympathizers, including John Dos Passos, Edmund Wilson, Theodore Dreiser, Elliot Cohen and Quincy Howe, protesting the actions of the C. P. in the Garden, as an important revolt against the disruptive policies of the C. P. leadership. But to one who has himself shared both the activities and the dilemmas of this group of intellectuals, and who helped draft and signed the protest, it is more than that. To him it is a milestone in the progress of the American intellectual toward the revolution.

The fact is that the Letter is by no means the first sprouting of serious political thinking on the part of intellectuals close to the movement. It is rather the first overt product of a ferment that goes wide and deep in their ranks. In the minds of many, the Garden affair, ended a period of private probation of the C. P., marked not only by serious discussion, but by considerable inner struggle and revolt. The high significance of the Letter is that it was a public challenge to the Party to defend its policy, as exemplified by the insane Garden tactic, and to drastically reform it, if it means to keep its influence on intellectuals seriously concerned with their own fate and with that of the working-class, two fates which they have learned to think of as one.

A Year of Probation

It was, of course, the German events that first crystallized into a serious current of political criticism dissent among Party sympathizers. All were deeply shaken by the tragedy of Hitler's victory, and the impotence of the German C. P. and the C. I. in the face of counter-revolution. Most intellectuals felt many out of a humility not altogether reprehensible, that they had no right to draw final conclusions as to the character and causes of Communist defeat in Germany. Others felt that they had reason to hope that, under the impact of the horrible events in Germany, Communist policies would improve. Political insight had progressed to a point where it was recognized that the united-front tactic was the crux of the whole problem. A move was made as long ago as February 1933 in the League of Professional Groups (an organization which was

the outgrowth of the intellectuals' campaign committee for Foster and Ford) to call upon the Party to permit the League to build an "organizational united-front" with social-cultural-defense organizations of different political tendencies and affiliations for effective action against Fascism. This proposal, which no member of the League could oppose, was defeated by appeals to Party loyalty made by the Party fraction, and by private intimations that the Party policy itself was soon to be changed in the direction of the "organizational united-front."

This the Party considered a victory over intellectual dissent. Of course it was no such thing: what the Party won was not approval of Party policy, but a short-term extension of suffering and toleration. This truce the Party has been able to maintain during the intervening months only by the dissolution of a policy of no-discussion, no-criticism-of-the-Party within the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners, the League against War and Fascism, and in the Party's intellectual organ (or rather, organ for Party intellectuals), the *New Masses*.

That this meant the withdrawal from activity in mass organizations of a large section of the best blood attracted to the movement in the past few years, and a corresponding anemia, has not seemed to the Party leadership too great a price to pay for maintaining the public fiction of support by intellectuals of policies which, it knew, it could not defend in discussion. The success of the Party fraction in the intellectual organizations is apparently measured not by its achievements in winning support and leading constructive activity for working-class ends, but by its success in upholding the public prestige of C. P. leadership. More and more during the past months the intellectual front has become a mere facade, behind which inanition and stagnation reign, galvanized on rare occasions into bursts of febrile, ineffective "activities."

Shattering the Intellectual Facade

Worn thin and torn in places by the strain of the past year, under the impact of the Garden affair the fabric binding the intellectuals to the Party was rent asunder. This most flagrant example of C. P. failure and persistent error, ended a year of probation of the Party. The Party's account under the heading "United-Front 1933-1934" was immediately called for audit, the balance was struck, and the verdict was unanimous: insolvency.

Not merely among the twenty-seven signers of the Open Letter, was it unanimous. The writer has heard, or had reliable reports of the reactions of perhaps thirty other intellectuals, some members of the Party. In no instance was the reaction other than violent disgust with the Party's behavior in the Garden. Such words as "sickening," "revolting," "horrible," "nauseating" recur again and again. Privately, and in confidence, not a single intellectual would defend or extenuate the disruptive action.

Moreover, a large majority has drawn political conclusions from the year's brooding over C. P. tactics. Almost without exception they recognize that there is something seriously rotten in the tactic of "united front" from below; they have given up defending a tactic which has to its credit no victories, and an unbroken record of catastrophic defeats. At least one-half, largely through acquaintance with Trotsky's analyses of the "united-front" and the testing of his contentions by their own organizational experience, have attained a clarity on this problem which contrasts amazingly with their ignorance and confusion a few short months ago. They know now that the "united-front from below" never has worked, and never will work, and they know why.

On the level of overt action, there has been, as could be expected, a parting of the ways. Twenty-seven intellectuals took an open stand. Almost as large a group, agreeing with the others in sentiment, would not openly criticize the Party.

What does this mean? In terms of action, the present development may be described as the moving of two groups of intellectuals one step each to a higher political level. The first group, individuals who during the past year have engaged in deeper and deeper private criticisms of the Party, and found themselves in consequence more and more isolated from Party activity, have now graduated into open public criticism, and the freedom from special obligation to or toleration of the Party. In its struggles with the class enemy, they will defend it, or cooperate with it, if it permits them, but they will not defend its fratricidal course within the ranks of the working-class.

The second position just vacated by the first: inner criticism and opposition within C. P. mass organ-

izations and in private talks, with the perspective of loss of Party confidence growing ineffectiveness, and passivity. Why do they not go further at this time? The "Party Terror"—the phrase is general among intellectuals—keeps some in line. Perhaps it is the intellectual's deplorable sensitiveness, or his cowardice, but one must appreciate the hesitancy to run afoul of the Party. It is only too well remembered that an editor of the *New Masses* had a political disagreement with the Party and woke up one morning to find himself publicly and officially accused by the Party in the *Daily Worker* of having driven his wife to suicide. And, alas, there are still some who have not exhausted the delights of acting that noble double-role on the revolutionary stage: red swash-buckler in the parlor and the committee room; silent good little underground mouse in some bourgeois editorial sanctum or academic grove, restraining himself—under Party discipline—from taking even a little proletarian snaw.

But most in this group stay in line, as their predecessors did for long before them, because they believe in the possibility of reform within the Party. Some have faith in this or that member of the C. C.; or in the "middle-leadership in the field" (ah, those mythical "healthy" D. O.'s in Denver and Dubuque!); some look forward to the regenerative impact of worsening objective conditions, or a cleansing flood of spontaneous rank-and-file revolt in the provinces and washing away the Ninth-Floor Swamp; some think they will be able to strike a blow for the "right policy" if only they keep in the good graces of the leadership until the Propitious Moment comes; a few cherish notions of ignoring broad questions of policy, and doing a good honest practical job, in some restricted field behind the back of the Party while the C. C. is not looking....

Yes, some are not very bright, and all are slow. But a better thing to say is that they have come a long way, and are likely to come farther. Nor are they likely to take so long to come into the open as their predecessors. The tempo of events is too fast. Yesterday, Germany. Today, Austria. Tomorrow? On the wall they see the shadow of the bayonet and the Fascist axe. The ferment among them is too great. Moreover, many of them are bound to the signers of the Letter by the closest ties of friendship, intellectual and artistic respect, and common labors in the past on the working-class front. Try as the Party will to isolate them from the men who have taken an open stand, they will not succeed.

The Challenge of the Intellectuals

In the meantime, the twenty-seven stand firm. The fact that the *Daily Worker* has not dared to print the Open Letter for workers to read, confirms their judgment.

Far from wavering, they have found their action an impetus to further action. They have discovered to their amazement that their indecision, vacillation, confusion, self-questioning of the past months—what the Party sneers at as Hamletism—has been somehow exorcized, once they found the courage to strike a simple, honest, forthright blow for a cause they believe in: the unity of the workers against Fascism. Hamletism, many of them see, breeds in the Party atmosphere, is indeed carefully nursed along by Party functionaries for their own ends. "For the first time in months," one writer expressed it, "I feel like I can really get down to some useful writing. And I think I could hit a few good licks for the Revolution—if I knew a good place where to hit them."

The dilemma expressed here is of the utmost seriousness. The intellectual is in a mood for action, means to act. But how? Where? What next?

—A SIGNER OF THE OPEN LETTER.

(In next week's Militant the same writer will continue the discussion in an article entitled "A Program for Intellectuals.")

PARIS COMMUNE MASS MEETING

March 18, 1871 the Parisian workers seized power. 63 years later the Austrian workers rose in battle against reaction. What are the lessons of these historic working class uprisings?

Speaker: ALBERT GLOTZER

Just Returned From Europe

American Delegate to the International Youth Conference scheduled to be held in Amsterdam, raided by police and held in Brussels, Belgium. Visited L. D. Trotsky in France

SUNDAY, March 18, 1934 at 8 p. m.

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The Political Situation in Spain

Since the November elections the Spanish political situation has undergone great changes. The Left Republican parties have been practically eliminated from parliament, and the socialists reduced to less than half of their former representation. The government has in fact passed into the hands of the Monarchists.

The present Lerroux government depends on the Monarchical forces just as the previous governments depended on the socialists who then constituted the largest group in parliament. In the former Cortes no Left Republican government could exist without the socialist support, just as at present Lerroux could not govern without depending on the Monarchical parties. The parliamentary situation then has made a turn of 180 degrees. The miserable petty advances made by the Republicans and Socialists during the period of their domination are now being gradually liquidated, while they object and protest ineffectually in order to keep up appearances and cover up their own impotence as a parliamentary force.

Workers Prepare For Struggle

Conscious of the danger of bourgeois reaction the proletariat, now as in other instances previous to the establishment of the Republic, prepares itself for a struggle. But—although this may seem strange at first sight—this preparation for revolutionary action is accompanied by a momentary inactivity. This phenomenon is due principally to the preponderance which the Socialist party has acquired in the last months.

As a consequence of the unfortunate policies of the revolutionary wing (principally the C. N. T., as the Communist party has not managed to play an important role) the Socialist party strengthened itself during its period in power. Its fall, at a time in which the revolutionary wing is broken and branded by failure, has contributed to aug-

ment the influence which it already had.

Following the general trend of the masses, the leadership of the other organization, either because of opportunism or lack of self confidence, inclined towards the Socialist party whose revolutionary tones during the electoral campaign created the most naive hopes and expectations. The Socialist party will do something—this is the sentiment of the majority—including the most class conscious sections of the proletariat. The consequence of all this is that, the whole working classes is at a standstill, awaiting whatever the Socialist party may do.

Meanwhile, the latter continues to make vague threats for the near future, at the same time that it does not offer the least resistance to the blows that the government deals every day against the conquests of the workers. The last anarchist insurrection naturally could not do more than accentuate this state of affairs.

United Front in Catalonia

The most important fact, and one which opens the greatest of possibilities in the midst of the already outlined unfavorable situation, is that the tendency towards the united front, always present among the workers, has at last been made a reality in Catalonia, giving a powerful situation in the same direction to the workers of the whole country. The initiative for the united front was taken by the syndicalist group of Pestana, (the most influential trade union group in the region) which is now outside of the C. N. T.

It would have been difficult if not impossible to constitute this united front if it were not for the fact that the most influential current in the movement supported the slogan. The remainder of the organizations responded favorably, either because they really desired the united front or because of the

importance of the call. The "Labor Alliance" was established including Pestana's *Federacion Sindicalista* and the unions affiliated to it, the Catalan organization of the Socialist Party, with its unions, the *Unio Socialista* (Autonomous party), *Maurin's Workers and Peasants Bloc*, the *Union de Rabasaires* (very important peasant organization) and the *Communist Left*.

The organizations remained outside of the united front: the official section of the C. N. T. and the *Communist Party*. The Stalinists answered the call with the expressed purpose of "unmasking" the rest of the organizations. Once the united front was constituted, the party realized that its mission had been fulfilled and it withdrew in order to unmask the "Allianza" from without. The official absence of the C. N. T. means nothing in view of the sectarianism of the anarchists, but the decomposition of the C. N. T. in the region, converts the *Allianza Obrera* into a more important and influential force in the Catalan labor movement than the official C. N. T. leadership.

For National Alliance

The first step of the *Allianza Obrera*, has been to propose that a united front be organized nationally. This proposal met with the opposition of the Socialist Party, which "for the moment" accepts the united front only on a regional and local scale. The Socialist party wants to flirt with the united front without carrying it to its final consequences, so as to give to both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat the impression that the Socialist Party is disposed to adopt a revolutionary attitude. But the current in favor of the united front is so strong that, in spite of the inevitable obstacles, it can be reasonably hoped that its organization will continue and that it can assume an effective intervention of the proletariat in the situation.

—L. FERSEN.

Prison Cellular, Madrid.

January 26, 1934.