

Why Political Democracy Must Go

By John Reed

I.

MODERATE "Socialism" — Menshevism — Right Wingism—is based largely on the theory that the class struggle will be won by capturing the political power through the ballot-box—that through a process of gradual, orderly progress, the election of candidates to office and the passage of social reform legislation, capitalism will grow weaker and weaker, and the Constitution will be amended into a charter of the Cooperative Commonwealth, or be peaceably abolished.

The modern capitalist state, in the words of Marx, is "nothing less than a machine for the oppression of one class by another, and that not less so in a democratic republic than under a monarchy."

This proposition was the rock upon which the second International split at the beginning of the European war. The dominant Moderate "Socialists" of all countries sooner or later embraced the formula that "political democracy is better than autocracy." In Germany the Majority Social Democratic leaders told their followers, "Russia threatens 'free' Germany. We must mobilize against Tsarism." In France England and Italy, they said "Defend 'Democracy' against autocracy. German militarism threatens us. This is the war that will end war."

The class-conscious proletariat of all lands was ripe for mass opposition to the War. The workers knew instinctively that this War had nothing whatever to do with "democracy" or "autocracy"—but was merely an intense form of competition between two groups of world-grasping imperialistic Powers, struggling for control of markets which had been made necessary through the gigantic development of Finance-Imperialism.

Especially in America was this fact clear. Not by the remotest stretch of the Rooseveltian imagination could the people be convinced that we were threatened by any "autocracy"—except industrial autocracy, which had already captured the country. The United States declared war after three years of European conflict had brought home to the understanding of the class-conscious workers of neutral countries, with sickening clearness, the falsity of the Wilsonian formula, "To make the world safe for democracy."

In entering the War, the ruling class of the United States played the part of a banker who has heavily financed one of the two huge competing trusts, and who, to defend his investment, must throw in all his resources to get rid of the competitor.

Hence the St. Louis Resolution of the American Socialist Party—the mandate of the rank and file of the Party to the Party leaders, which was disregarded by them again and again as they surrendered, little by little, their opposition to the War.

The formation of the Left Wing, and its sharp call to the Socialist movement to abolish the social-reform planks in Party platforms, has posed with cutting distinctness the question of whether or not we shall try to win Socialism by means of political democracy, making use of the capitalist State machinery.

II.

Let us for the moment examine the character of American political democracy.

In this country, as in all modern "democratic" countries, there are two sides to government—political and economic. The policies of modern "democratic" countries are dictated by the capitalist "interests." As Woodrow Wilson has pointed out in his *New Freedom*, the government of this

country is in the hands of the great aggregations of capital.

This process of concentration of wealth into the hands of the few began during the Civil War, when the manufacturers of munitions of war, the purveyors of provisions, and the speculators piled up colossal fortunes. This was the period when J. P. Morgan laid the foundations of his riches by selling defective rifles to the Government, and John Wanamaker by providing shoddy uniforms for the Union troops. The floating of Government War Loans, also, brought into the hands of a few bankers an immense financial power. Immediately after the War, the looting of the South, the expansion of industry, the girdling of the continent with railroads, the spoliation of natural resources, and the speculation in land, assumed vast proportions, and became glaringly apparent to the petit bourgeoisie—the small property holders.

This class then consisted largely of farmers. The rest of the population, when hard-pressed, could always leave the cities and go out on the measureless free lands of the West. So the first revolt of the small property holders was against land-looting, and culminated with partial success in the Homestead Law.

But the farmer was at the mercy of all the great interests. They controlled the railroads, the markets, the banks, the price of tools. In spite of the high prices paid for produce during the War, the farmer was badly in debt. He had not been able to purchase Government securities, but he had been forced to pay ruinous taxes, whose imposition was supported by the manufacturers in the towns, because they *actually stimulated business*.

The new money-kings were manipulating the currency so that the Government would redeem the depreciated securities held by them, and throw the burden on the backs of the workers and the small property holders. This led to the beginnings of revolt against the great interests, in which the foundation was Cheap Money—Greenbackism, Populism, and later, Bryan's Free Silver campaigns of twenty-five years ago.

This is the *real* American ancestry of American Socialism, upon which were grafted the theories of Marxian and—predominantly—Lasalleian Socialism brought from Europe by the Germans who emigrated after 1848; and the Fourierism introduced by Albert Brisbane and Horace Greeley.

The next revolt of the petit bourgeoisie in America was the Progressive Movement. This also occurred after a war—in this case, a frankly Imperialistic war which marked the formal entrance of American capitalism into the period of Capitalist Imperialism. The whole period was summed up in the emergence of the great trusts during the administration of McKinley and Mark Hanna, the open advocacy of high tariffs, no longer to "protect infant industries," or to increase wages, but as a basis for the great monopolies of the means of production and distribution in the United States, and a weapon in the international war of Capitalist Imperialism—"Dollar Diplomacy."

The Progressive Movement properly so-called, was a reform movement to reshape the Republican Party so that it would not be smashed by the growing hostility of the small property-holders, made desperate by the ruthlessness of Big Business. It advocated all sorts of checks upon the power of Big Business—reform of the electoral laws, so as to give the small property-holders a voice in the government (initiative and referendum, recall, direct election of Senators, Woman Suffrage); low tariff (a sort of modified Free

Trade); and many other measures of relief, which were expressed with all their significance and all their short-sightedness in the various Anti-Trust Acts, Interstate Commerce Commissions, etc.

La Follette was the strongest and most uncompromising leader of the Progressive Movement; he awakened, first, the small property-holders of his State, and then of the entire country. The great capitalists who at first fought Progressivism, finally realized the futility of open battle, and resorted to their time-honored tactics of capturing the movement. Men like George Perkins, of the United States Steel Corporation—one of the most powerful of the trusts—financed the Progressive Party and became one of its leaders. To speak plainly, he bought it. Roosevelt, when in the White House, at first fought the Progressives. Being a shrewd politician, however, he soon saw that Progressivism was going to win, and took over most of the weapons in the Progressive armory, flourishing them aloft in the sight of all men, and emitting loud cries. The fight of Progressivism against the trusts assumed such proportions that it blocked the Morgan interests in their plans for consolidating the steel industry of the country in one huge, profitable and invincible trust. Whereupon, the Morgan interests unleashed the panic of 1907, and the Government gave in.

This was not the end, however. The Movement under La Follette assumed great proportions. More and more openly, with an ever greater and greater following, La Follette attacked Big Business. The plutocracy was frightened. Its agents, Perkins and others, attempted in vain to check the growth of petit bourgeois revolt. Roosevelt, returning from Africa, was making a triumphal tour of Europe, among other things reviewing the Prussian Guard at the side of the Kaiser. Emissaries of Perkins went to meet him, and secret plans were laid by which La Follette was to be displaced.

The opportunity arrived. La Follette, Progressivism's Presidential candidate, was invited to the Publishers' Dinner in Philadelphia. There, with characteristic frankness, he told the editors and publishers of America that *the press was controlled by Big Business which used it to exterminate the petit bourgeoisie*.*

This was the signal for Big Business to attack. The artillery of the great press, which had been conciliating its subscribers—the majority of whom were small property holders—by commenting favorably upon Progressivism, now turned upon La Follette and blasted him with contempt and ridicule. And at the same time Perkins and the other leaders came out for Roosevelt as Progressive candidate.

The Republican Party, willing to lose rather than to adopt the La Follettism with which the rank and file of the petit bourgeoisie was infected, insolently suppressed the small property-holders in the Chicago Convention in 1912. The Progressives made a fight, but it was a losing fight, and they knew it, and so did the small property-holders all over the country, who, despairing of the Republican Party, threw most of their support to the Democrats.

Big Business knew that the small property-holders would probably elect the President and Congress, but they also realized that the great trusts

(Continued on page 7)

*Although the press, especially the monthly magazines, had for years carried on the battle of Progressivism—the period of "mucking-raking"—by this time (1912), it had been pretty generally taken over by the great financial interests, and had ceased its attacks on vested interests. I shall treat this question in a later installment.