

Mobilizing Soldiers Against Socialism

By V. G.

A Study in Class Consciousness

ON May 8, 9 and 10 there was held in St. Louis a congress of "soldiers," to lay plans for organizing an American Legion of veterans of the war. Things did not run smoothly. It was inevitable that there should appear at this congress, and in the "soldiers' movement," the same class antagonisms that characterize and rend modern society.

The idea of convoking this congress was formulated by men "at the top." The basis of representation is largely a mystery, but it is clear that it was not democratic, but determined by the officers. It was not, clearly, representative of the man in the ranks. Military authority, and not the soldiers' democracy, was in control.

Why the congress? The "sad experiences" of Russia, Germany and Austria-Hungary are demonstrating to the American governing forces that their power is based upon the blind obedience and subservience of the soldiers in carrying out orders. Should the soldiers begin to think seriously about the expediency and purpose of these orders, and out of their thinking draw practical conclusions, the whole of modern society, based upon violence and robbery, would totter to its foundations.

There are very stringent measures in the arsenals of "democratic" America to make the soldiers obedient. The American court-martial system was so terrible that even members of the General staff "cried out" in protest. They were frightened, lest the too-harsh character of court-martial justice might make the soldiers erupt and accelerate the catastrophe which our "democratic" country is feverishly approaching. But if fear holds to obedience the soldiers in the active army, this proves not so effective with soldiers discharged from the service. These men have undergone "Egyptian tortures" in France: death lay in wait for them, while the trench life was abominable. They had to answer with their own skins the mistakes and blunders of their commanders. They know that owing to uncoordinated action of the commanders, thousands of soldiers died in vain, even from the point of view of purely military strategy. These soldiers back from the war will doff the uniform and don the overalls in no meek spirit—they will not as in the past submissively accept a monotonous and joyless life.

In order to arouse a "patriotic" disposition among the workers, they were promised great things from the war—democracy, a "new world," almost a social revolution. But now that the victorious soldiers must return to work, they learn from bitter experience that these great promises were mere bluff. The prices of the means of life continue to rise, despite the end of the war. Instead of a quiet life at home, yesterday's fighters for "democracy" are faced by unemployment, dispossession from their homes, and other blessings of the old order. The landlords are impartial—they skin equally all tenants, even though they are soldier heroes. True, Methodist churches are offering shelter to these soldiers—but it wasn't to become beggars that these workers put on the soldier's uniform and went to fight in France!

The soldiers are discontented. They are excited. Measures are necessary, any measures, in order to pacify them—and soldiers are incited to break up Socialist and radical meetings and destroy buildings. There must be found an outlet for the discontent in the heart of the soldiers—and pogroms are incited against the radical elements. They try to make strike breakers out of the returned soldiers. Thus the rowdy expressions of groups of American soldiers are due to the deliberate incitation of their masters and their own lack of understanding.

The three million soldiers recruited on the basis of universal military service were composed of about 95% of men from industrial life. And now the ruling class exerts all its efforts to create in the minds of these former workers (who are again to become workers) prejudice against companions of yesterday in the factory and the shop. All means are resorted to in this task. The "soldiers' congress" at St. Louis was one such means. The purpose of this congress, according to its initiators, was to unite all men formerly in the service, the privates as well as the generals, into an "American Legion." It was made clear at the congress

that, once given a job, the soldier-workers would immediately develop into faithful guardians of the interests of "beneficent" capital. The spirit of reactionary militarism was dominant. Hysteria was rampant against the "radicals." Representatives of a Council of Soldiers and Sailors was reviled and excluded. The whole spirit of the congress was to mobilize the soldiers against Socialism, in favor of that "law and order" which means supremacy for Capitalism and oppression for the workers.

To accomplish these sinister purposes, an energetic campaign of propaganda is being carried on and certain "practical measures" taken. Former soldiers are given preference in applying for city or state jobs. Employers are being bombarded with propaganda literature advising them to adopt the same preferential policy. At the same time, the main object of the American Legion is being emphasized—defense of the present system of the exploitation of labor, based upon the private ownership of the means of production. The members of the Legion must carry on at all times a relentless struggle not only against the Bolsheviks, but against any manifestation of the class struggle of the American workers.

But the facts and the indications are that this pro-

ject of the initiators of the American Legion will not succeed for long. Among the rank and file of the former soldiers there is much dissatisfaction with the clique composed of the upper strata of the military hierarchy. First of all, the soldier privates are not satisfied with the name of the Legion. They state that the name "American Legion" does not reveal the aims which, in their opinion, should animate the organization of the soldiers. They are interested not so much in "Americanism" as in their daily bread; and the initiators of the Legion are apparently not concerned with this phase of the problem: in righteous patriotic indignation they rejected the proposal for six-months pay for the soldiers—which is all very well for the military aristocrats!

The soldier privates, moreover, are dissatisfied with the fact that the Legion is dominated by the officers: colonels majors and captains. They are against making Lieutenant Roosevelt president of the Legion. The soldiers privates maintain that the Legion could express their interests only when the rank and file dominates. And the officers must be plain soldiers—not the sons of rich fathers, but of their own class, of the workers who from personal bitter experience understand factory oppression and unemployment and starvation wages.

These initial differences and antagonisms are indications of the awakening to consciousness of the American workers who are again becoming workers after their experience in the uniform. They seem to feel instinctively that nothing good can come from the Roosevelts, O'Byans and Wickershams, the generals, colonels and majors. It is best that they should part. These former soldiers, meeting their former officers as men of property, as bosses and employers, will be mercilessly oppressed. In their every day lives they will meet these "comrades of Legion" as landlords and business men who will skin them alive. And all this will sooner or later open completely the eyes of these workers who were formerly in the soldier's uniform, will reveal to them that "the master is not a brother to the peasant."

This process of awakening is now in action. The soldier privates are already organizing into an organization of their own—National Organization of the Private Soldiers and Sailors of America. Of this organization its president says: "In time, we'll have every private that served in the war enlisted in our legion. In no shape or form is it affiliated with an officers' organization, nor can an officer join." This is simply the start of a larger antagonism, which the Socialist must intensify.

The soldiers who are again to become workers must think and act as workers. Oppressed and humiliated, they will join together with the oppressed and humiliated who never wore the soldier's uniform in a conscious struggle against those who live from the labor and blood of the workers—whether in uniforms or in overalls.

It will not be enough for the private soldiers to organize independent of their officers. They must go beyond that—to a more conscious class policy. Refusal to organize together with the officers is in itself a recognition of class divisions. The officers represent actually or in ideology, the ruling class of Capitalism.

The class struggle is the great fact, by means of which alone the workers and soldier-workers were fighting for "democracy" ceases, in war or in peace; while the soldiers-workers were fighting for "democracy" in Europe, the capitalists used the opportunity to put over reaction and oppress labor.

The war has awakened many. The soldiers will come home with new ideas and a more intense energy. They will not be satisfied with the old. Their energy, at this moment, is being directed against Socialism. But the soldier-workers will realize the futility of this, that they are acting against their own class in acting against Socialism. Then they will unite with the Socialist proletariat for the conquest of Capitalism—for work, peace and happiness.

This struggle is at the basis of things. For the workers (and the former soldiers) to avoid this struggle, is to deliver themselves body and soul to the oppressing Capitalists. The capitalists wage this struggle against labor, consciously and implacably; it is necessary that labor should.

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