

The Rape of Finland's Labor Republic

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A few years ago Jack London's book, "The Iron Heel," created quite a sensation. At a time when the workers' power grew so strong as to threaten the very existence of capitalism, London portrayed the oligarchy resorting to hired armies to put down labor, creating for a long time a reign of oligarchical terror, destroying labor organizations and all democratic achievements of the people. This idea, at the time, seemed to many Socialists a child of unbridled fancy, a nightmare, an impossibility in a civilized world.

But the reality is stranger than fiction. Comrade London was good enough to imagine that the only element of society which the oligarchy could induce to perform tasks of that character, would be thugs, gunmen and ignorant and reactionary workmen. If at that time he would have said that the enlightened working class of Germany would have lent itself to perform a "mission" of the same kind in the interests of a threatened oligarchy of another country, he would have been ostracized by every orthodox member of the International.

The irony of fate—a nemesis to the German Socialist majority decision of August 4, 1914—would so have it that the hundredth anniversary of Marx' birth witnesses that stupefying nightmare, the tragedy of the German workers, clad in Prussian uniform, blindly following their leaders to Finland to strangle one of the first labor republics, to murder thousands of Finnish workingmen and women, so that capitalist privileges and feudal rights may be re-established in Finland.

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It is impossible to understand events in Finland without taking into consideration the social and political background. Up to 1905 there was no popular representation in the Government or in the Diet. The great mass of the people were wholly without

political rights. Under the old feudal constitution most of the producing population was in a condition of virtual serfdom. Tenant farmers were compelled to yield payment in labor to the wealthy overlords. The hereditary Swedish-speaking aristocracy, with feudal class privileges, was able to continue, under the old constitution, mediaeval forms of oppression. The class struggle of the Finnish people started as a struggle for education in the native language. In this struggle good results were obtained. The Finnish people are probably the most illiterate in the world. Ninety-eight per cent. of the population could neither read nor write. A popular culture, however, had grown up as part of the labor movement, together with a strong cooperative organization which was vital in the life of the people. In Finland, as in most of the Russian border provinces, the labor movement had come to the fore as the only organized force opposed to the crushing feudal system of privilege.

The revolution of 1905 established a single Chamber Diet in Finland, based on universal male and female suffrage, with proportional representation. In the first Diet chosen under this democratic franchise, the Socialists secured forty per cent of the members—by far the largest *bloc* among the various parties. This strength was increased in successive elections, and in 1916,—the last legal election,—the labor party secured a clear majority in the Diet. Most of the laws designed to diminish the feudal oppressions under which the great mass of the people suffered, were vetoed by the Czar, through the influence of the aristocracy, which was in close contact with the Russian bureaucracy. The Czar in the meantime was attempting the Russification of Finland as a Grand Duchy of Russia, through a system of military terrorism, which was opposed by the strong Socialist organization, and also by the bourgeoisie, but by the latter only in so far as it was detrimental to certain privileges of the wealthy classes.

There was a clause in the Finnish Constitution which provided for the independence of the country when the Government of the Czar ceased to rule over it. In accordance with this clause, after the downfall of Czarism, the Diet declared Finland independent. The aristocracy, seeing in this the end of their