

The Dictatorship of the Proletariat

By L. KAMENEFF

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Price 10 Cents

PUBLISHED BY "THE TOILER"
3207 CLARK AVENUE, CLEVELAND, OHIO

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The Dictatorship of the Proletariat

By L. KAMENEFF

Conservatism in ideology, theories based on principles, slowness in their adaptation to rapidly-changing life, their constant lagging behind the constantly changing forms of the struggle—have frequently been noted by Marxists. In our struggle for Communism, we constantly meet with these facts, we constantly have to remark how great is the power of the old ideology even over the best men of the present Labor movement—in so far as these men have grown up in the atmosphere of pre-war Europe.

This mental conservatism is most strikingly observed in their approach to the question of dictatorship. Six years of war and revolution (1914-1920) it would seem should have elucidated this finally, from all points of view, by practice, by facts out of the everyday life of the masses; and yet, even among the comrades adhering to the Third International, we are often confronted with the question: "What is the dictatorship of the proletariat? Cannot the Labor movement attain its object without a dictatorship? Why is dictatorship inevitable?" I heard these questions not only from the members of the British Trade Union delegation, but even from some of the members of the delegation of Italian Socialists.

When one hears such questions one thinks involuntarily that the persons uttering them must have slept through a whole historical period, and, first of all, through the world-war of 1914-18. For these years constituted a model epoch of dictatorship, and the method of carrying on the war were models of the application of dictatorial methods of ruling a country.

From the point of view of the government of a country, the imperialist war consisted in the assembling and placing under a single command of millions of men, in providing their equipment and transport, and compelling these many millions of men to carry out certain tasks. These tasks were foreign to these millions, and were

accompanied for each of them, separately, and for all together, with incredible sufferings, privations, and the risk of death. How did the governments of Europe, America and Asia accomplish the task? By what methods did they guarantee the assembling, equipment, transport and command of these millions? By what methods did they secure the adaptation of the whole administrative, economic and social life of the state to carry out the tasks set by the government? Was this achieved by means of democracy? By the means of parliamentarism? By means of the realization of the sovereignty of the "people"?

The sovereignty of the people, democracy, the State, parliamentarism, even from the point of view of their hypocritical bourgeois defenders, cannot but mean the discussion and decision, if only of the most important questions, of the state and social life by the citizens themselves, "free" and "equal" in the eyes of the law.

However, at present, even the most unenlightened peasant, in the most backward of all countries drawn into the war, knows that the government of his country in 1914-1918 was, as a whole and in every detail, a clear, simple, elementary refutation of these regulations of bourgeois democracy. Democracy, parliaments, elections, freedom of the press, remained—in so far as they did remain—a mere screen; in reality all the countries drawn into the war—the whole world—were governed by the methods of a dictatorship, which utilized, when it happened to be convenient and profitable, elections, parliaments and the press.

One must be a blind fool or a conscious deceiver of the masses, not to see, or to conceal, this fundamental fact; at the most critical period of their history, at the moment of their struggle for existence, the bourgeois States of Europe, Asia and America defended themselves not by means of democracy and parliamentarism, but by openly passing over to the methods of dictatorship.

It was the dictatorship of the general staffs, of the officers' corps, and of large industry, to whom belonged, not only actually, but also formally, all power both in the army and in the country; who commanded, not only lives, but also the property of the whole country and of every citizen, not only living at the time but yet to be born (the military debts of Messrs. Romanoff, Hohenzollern, Clemenceau and Lloyd

George will cover the lives and work of future generations).

During several years, before the eyes of the whole human race, a picture of the practice of dictatorship is unrolled—a dictatorship ruling over the whole world, determining everything, regulating everything, penetrating everything, and confirming its existence by 20,000,000 corpses on the fields of Europe and Asia. It is natural, therefore, that to the question, "What is dictatorship?" the Communists should answer: "Open your eyes, and you will see before you a splendidly elaborated system of bourgeois dictatorship, which has achieved its object; for it has given that concentration of power into the hands of a small group of world imperialists which allowed them to *conduct their war and attain their peace* (of Versailles). Do not pretend that dictatorship—as a system of government, as a form of power—can frighten anyone except the old women of bourgeois pacifism. The dictatorship of the proletariat suppresses, not 'equality,' 'liberty,' and 'democracy,' but only the bourgeois dictatorship, which in 1914-18 showed itself to be the most bloody, most tyrannical, most pitiless, cynical and hypocritical of all forms of power that ever existed."

The theorist of Communism, beginning with Karl Marx, proved, however, a long while ago, that the dictatorship of the proletariat does not consist in replacing the bourgeoisie by the proletariat at the same governmental machine. The task of the dictatorship of the proletariat is to *break up* the machinery of government created by the bourgeoisie, and re replace it by a new one, created on a different basis and reposing on a new co-relation of the classes.

The dictatorship of the proletariat appears in the programs of the Socialist parties, not later than the seventies of the nineteenth century. However, during the whole period of the Second International, it did not once, on any occasion, become the practical duty of the day, and attracted the attention neither of the practical workers nor of the theoreticians of the Labor movement; and only when, in 1914-18, through the veil of democracy, parliamentarism, and political liberty, the unmistakable features of the bourgeois dictatorship became clearly discernible, did the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat become a real force. It became a force because, as Marx says, it took possession of the proletarian masses.

In the 1903 program of the Russian Social Democratic Party—a program which aspired to be only a precise and improved statement of the programs of the Social Democratic parties already in existence, and which at the time, in 1903, united both the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks—the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat was expressed as follows:

“The necessary condition for the social revolution is the dictatorship of the proletariat, that is the conquest by the proletariat of a political power that will allow it to crush all resistance on the part of the exploiters.” This definition is embodied without alteration in the program of the Russian Communist Party.

The authors of the 1903 program could not foresee the actual circumstances in which the proletariat of any country would have to take the power into its hands. They certainly did not attempt at the time to define in what measure the dictatorship of the proletariat would be connected with the formation of a proletarian (Red) army, with the practice of Terror, with the limitation of political liberties. They had to underline, and they did underline, not these changeable elements—varying in the various countries—of the proletarian dictatorship, but its fundamental and unchanging feature, inevitable for any country and any historical conditions under which the proletariat seizes power.

The proletariat not only seizes power; in grasping it, the proletariat gives to it such a character, such a degree of concentration, energy, determination, absoluteness, infinitude, as according to the words of the program, “will allow it to crush all resistance on the part of the exploiters.” That is the fundamental feature of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

The dictatorship of the proletariat is therefore an organization of the State and a form of administration of State affairs which, in the transitional stage from capitalism to Communism, will allow the proletariat, as the ruling class, to crush all resistance on the part of the exploiters to the work of Socialist reconstruction.

It is thus clear that the question itself of the necessity, the inevitability of a proletarian dictatorship for every capitalist country is connected with the question as to whether the resistance of the exploiters to their expropriation by

Socialist society—or, more precisely, by society marching towards Socialism—is inevitable.

In the same way, the question regarding the degree of severity of the dictatorship, the extent and conditions of the limitation of the political rights of the bourgeoisie and limitation of political liberty in general, the application of terrorist methods, etc., is indissolubly linked with the question of the degree, forms, stubbornness and organization of resistance by the exploiters.

Anyone who expresses a doubt as to the inevitability of the dictatorship of the proletariat, as a necessary stage towards Socialist society, thereby expresses a doubt of the bourgeoisie showing any resistance to the proletariat at the decisive hour of the expropriation of the exploiters.

Propaganda based on this may be dictated either by individual stupidity, or the interest of a group of persons in concealing from the proletariat the circumstances of the forthcoming struggle, and in preventing it from preparing for the same.

When persons, calling themselves Socialists, declare that the course of dictatorship, admissible and explicable for Russia, is in no wise obligatory or inevitable for any other capitalist country, they proclaim a thing directly contrary to truth. The actual Russian bourgeoisie always was, and up to the October Revolution remained, the least organized, the least conscious in the sense of class, the least united of all bourgeois classes in the countries of the old capitalist order. The Russian peasantry had not time enough to develop that class of strong and politically-united peasants, which is the basis of a series of bourgeois parties in the West. The Russian middle class of the towns, crushed and politically unenlightened, never represented anything like such groups of the population as, in the West, create and support the parties of "Christian Socialism" and anti-Semitism.

The first thunder claps of the proletarian revolution broke over this politically backward, inactive and unorganized class. "The resistance of the exploiters" to the blows of the Russian proletariat must therefore be considered as comparatively weak—weak, naturally only in comparison with the activity which the bourgeoisie of any other European country will be able to develop. The actively resisting ele-

ment, which dragged on the struggle for three years, were not the unorganized forces of the Russian bourgeoisie, but, first of all, foreign interventionists, and then the bourgeoisie of the border countries (Finland, Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine), which, playing upon the century-old hatred against Tsarist Russia, managed to unite under the flag of nationalism certain organized groups for resistance against the Russian proletariat. If it were not for these external circumstances, the resistance of the Russian bourgeoisie would have been broken, not in three years, but in three months, and the proletarian apparatus of State power would naturally have directed all its energy towards other ends.

In conformity with the nature of the resistance which was to be expected from the Russian propertied classes and their organizations, the dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia had its period of "rosy illusions" and "sentimental youth."

There can be nothing more mistaken than to assume that the Russian proletariat, or even its leader, the Communist Party, came into power with recipes, prepared in advance, of practical measures for the realization of the dictatorship. Only "Socialist" ignoramuses, or charlatans, could suggest that the Russian Communists came into power with a prepared plan for a standing army, Extraordinary Commissions, and limitations of political liberty, to which the Russian proletariat was obliged to recur for self-defense after bitter experience. The cause of the proletariat was saved, because it soon profited by its acquired experience and, with unflinching energy, applied these methods of struggle when it became convinced of their inevitability.

The transference of power to the Soviets, and the formation of the new Workers' and Peasants' Government took place on November 7th, 1917. The discomfiture and disorganization of the bourgeoisie was so great that it was unable to muster any serious forces against the workmen. The resistance of the government of Kerensky was broken after a few days. The elections to the Constituent Assembly still continued. All the political parties—up to Miliukoff's party—continued to exist openly. All the bourgeois newspaper continued to circulate. Capital punishment was abolished. The army was being demobilized. In the hands of the government there were no other forces than the

volunteer detachment of armed workmen. The Ministers of Kerensky's government arrested, during the first days, (the leaders of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, Avksentieff, Gotz, Zenzinöff, the Generals Boldareff, Krasnoff and others—later on, all of them, leaders of the armed struggle against the Soviet power and members of the rebel governments of Siberia, the Don and the South) were set free. Generals Denikin, Markoff, Erdeli and others remained in the hands of the Soviet power up to November 20th and left its limits alive.

Yes, that was the period of "rosy illusions." It continued for a few months.

The conditions began to change by April-May, 1918. In April, 1918, the decree regarding the formation of a standing Red Army was published. Only in April the Extraordinary Commissions acquired the right to execute robbers caught in the net and officers going off to Korniloff, according to his secret mobilization. Only on June 18th did the Revolutionary Court pass its first sentence of death on the Admiral commanding the Baltic Fleet. Only in May were measures taken to stop the publication of the bourgeois papers (at the moment of this suppression there were thirty papers against three of the Soviets in Moscow alone). Only in June, 1918, were the Mensheviks driven out of the Soviets.

Thus over six months (November, 1917—April-May, 1918) passed from the moment of the formation of the Soviet power to the practical application by the proletariat of any harsh dictatorial measures. The increased severity in the dictatorship was called forth by a series of very elementary facts. In April, the government of Skoropadsky was organized in Kieff; in May took place the rising of the Czecho-Slovaks, their seizure of the railway system and the formation of the Socialist-Revolutionary government in the East; in May, too, the Cossack counter-revolution on the Don—the Russian Vendee—acquired increased importance under the command of General Krasnoff.

Parallel with this, all the attention and energy of the working class was concentrated on the tasks of the war, and the Soviet state was transformed into a camp of armed proletarians.

Such was the experience of the Russian proletariat. We have now before us the experience of the class struggle for proletarian power in Finland, Hungary and Germany. The fundamental difference between the experience of Hungary, Finland and Germany and that of Russia consists in the fact that the bourgeoisie of those countries proved, as was to be expected, to be much more organized, united and capable of fighting than the Russian bourgeoisie. Its period of confusion was much shorter; it organized a counter-attack against the proletariat much more rapidly and energetically; and by that very fact shortened the period of illusions of the proletariat itself as to the nature of its dictatorship.

The experience of the workers of Russia, Finland, Hungary and Germany allows us to establish an empiric law of the development of proletarian dictatorship, which may be expressed approximately in the following words. The fact of the conquest of the central political power by the proletariat in no wise completes the struggle for power, but only marks the beginning of a new and more determined period of warfare between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

After the first blow of the proletarian revolution and the seizure of the central apparatus of power by the proletariat, the bourgeoisie inevitably needs a certain time for mobilization of its forces, the bringing up of reserves and their organization. Its passing to a counter attack opens up an epoch of undisguised warfare, and armed clash of the forces of both sides.

It is just during this period that the rule of the proletariat acquires the harsh features of a dictatorship: a Red Army, a terrorist suppression of the exploiters and their allies, the limitation of political liberty, becomes inevitable if the proletariat does not wish to give up without a fight the power it has won.

The dictatorship of the proletariat is consequently a form of government of the state which is most adapted to the carrying on of a war with the bourgeoisie, and to guarantee most rapidly the victory of the proletariat in such war.

Are there any grounds for presuming that such a war in Europe will be carried on in less acute forms? That the European bourgeoisie will submit with a lighter heart to the expropriation of its riches by the proletariat? Can any

reasonable person build his tactics on the supposition that the European bourgeoisie will not show all the resistance of which it is capable against the proletariat which has seized power? Can one presume that, entering into the fight against the proletariat in power, the European bourgeoisie will prove to be less armed, less capable of fighting, less united and less prudent than the bourgeoisie of Russia, Finland or Hungary? Can one imagine that it will stop at any means, beginning with a far-reaching union with the betrayers of Socialism from the camp of the Second International and ending with the bombardment of the workmen's quarters and the application of the latest technical methods for the suffocation of the enemy in war?

What under these conditions can be the meaning of a doubt in the inevitability of the methods of proletarian dictatorship, or a refusal to work, day in and day out, for the preparation of the proletariat to utilize all the methods of dictatorship in the coming struggle?

To move towards a seizure of power, not hoping to hold it, and not preparing the conditions for holding it, is simply foolhardiness; to recognize the necessity for the proletariat conquering power, and to doubt the necessity of a dictatorship of the proletariat, to refuse to instruct the workers in this direction—means consciously to prepare the betrayal of the cause of Socialism. Whoever does not recognize the necessity for the severest proletarian dictatorship during the transitional period from capitalism to Socialism; does not prepare the necessary conditions for the proletariat, on acquiring the central apparatus of power, at once directing it to the suppression of the resistance of the exploiters; whoever does not explain to the proletariat, as a necessary condition here and now, of its victory, the inevitability of an armed struggle and harsh measures against treason and hesitation, and does not arm the proletariat with the suitable weapons—that person is preparing the ruin of the proletariat and the victory of the bourgeoisie.

But if the dictatorship of the proletariat is an organization of power, which is best adapted to the carrying on of the war against the bourgeoisie and the suppression of its resistance, then we have an answer also to the question which is generally put to the Communists by the syndicalists of various schools of thought. The latter while admitting

the dictatorship of the proletariat, cannot divest themselves of their old prejudices against a political party of the proletariat. The question, consequently, is: what organization is capable of achieving a solution of the problems of dictatorship?

There can be no doubt that, at the moment of a decisive class war, the power of command and compulsion must lie in the hands of a definite organization, capable of bearing the responsibility for each step it takes and of guaranteeing the logical sequence of these steps.

The army of the proletariat, moving in battle order, must have its general staff. When leading its regiments to the attack, that general staff must be capable of surveying the sum total of the international, political and economic conditions of the struggle. It must possess equal authority over all kinds of arms at the disposition of the working class. It must be in a position to carry out its decisions through the trade unions, and the workmen's co-operatives, through the factory committees, and through the leagues of young workers, by means of written propaganda, and through the fighting militia of armed workers.

At the moment when the old power is overthrown and the apparatus of government is seized by the revolting proletariat, that general staff has new tasks to perform. The victory of the proletariat signifies the disorganization of the old social system. The formation of a new army, the feeding of the country, the building up of industry on new principles, the organization of law courts, the establishment of relations with the peasants, the diplomatic relations with other countries—all these matters become at once the immediate tasks of the general staff of the victorious proletarian army. Any delay in the accomplishment of one of these tasks, or any hesitation in the decision, is capable of bringing greatest harm to the further victorious development of the proletarian revolution.

Consequently, this general staff must be an organized responsible, and centralized institution, prepared to deal with, and decide all political, economic, social and diplomatic problems. An organization which would satisfy all these conditions and solve all the problems incumbent upon it may be called, of course, by any name whatsoever; but in reality—and if we do not play with words—such an organ-

ization can only be the political party of the proletariat; *i. e.*, an organization of the most advanced, revolutionary elements of the proletariat, united by their common political program and an iron discipline.

Such an organization cannot be formed in a day or even a week; it is the result of a prolonged process of assembling and selecting experienced leaders, who have proved, by their daily work, to be capable of estimating rightly each phase of the labor struggle, and the interests of each separate group of the working class, from the higher point of view of the general interests of the entire working class as a whole.

The greatest misfortune which could befall the proletarian army after seizing the strongholds of capitalism, would be if the apparatus of leadership proved to be in the hands of men, groups, or organizations whose previous work had been carried out only in the sphere of the labor movement.

The suppression of the resistance of the exploiters—which is the fundamental task of the dictatorship—is not only a military, or only a political, or only an economic task; it is all of them—military, political, economic. The resistance of the exploiters acquires only its most acute form during an armed conflict; but the rich peasantry, which will not give the bread for the famishing population; the engineers who sabotage industry; and the bankers who bring confusion into the mutual account of the industrial enterprises by concealing their books—are not less important factors in the resistance of the bourgeoisie. The suppression of all these various forms of resistance can be as little the work of an organization created in the narrow sphere of the trade union movement, as, say, of a workers' co-operative organization. It can be successfully achieved only by a general organization of all the workers, in the shape of their Soviets, in which are represented all the forms of the labor movement, and which are under the guidance of a political party, concentrating in itself the whole experience of the previous struggle of the working class.

In the epoch of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the Communist Party is still more necessary for the working class than in any other. It constitutes an essential condition for victory. A refusal to work for its creation and strength-

ening means a renunciation of the efficient carrying on of the class war, *i. e.*, a renunciation of dictatorship, of a condition of the victory of Socialism, and may engender, although unconsciously, the most cruel betrayal of the working class cause, by depriving the proletariat, at the most critical moment, of its most important weapon. Anyone who doubts the inevitability of the dictatorship of the proletariat, as a necessary stage of its victory over the bourgeoisie, facilitates the conditions for the victory of the latter; anyone who doubts or renounces the political party of the proletariat, is helping to weaken and disorganize the working class.

June, 1920.

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