

Blast from the Past

In the wake of the election pantomime staged by the British bourgeoisie, the publication of the following text, the first in a series of reprints from the workers' movement, is particularly appropriate.

The extract has been taken from The Socialist of March 3rd 1921, the newspaper of the Socialist Labour Party. In it James Clunie argues that with the new period opened up by World War I and the Russian revolution, the working class has nothing to gain by participating in parliamentary elections.

Leftist historians like to portray the SLP as a syndicalist or anarchist group, a charge that is rebutted by the following passage from the Socialist of March 10th 1921:

" We belong to the Third Communist International and we are Bolsheviks, not because of "mouldy constitutions" but because of our view of revolutionary marxism have we stood opposed to the supposed British Communist Party of Great Britain, and we hope to be able to

continue that clear and clean attitude until we are able to establish a real united Communist Marxist organisation, and not a conglomeration of Labourist Reformists...."

Though the SLP had certain eccentricities and sectarian lapses, particularly when it refused to help form the anti-parliamentary Communist Party (British Section of the Third International) in Spring 1920, it was far clearer than the British Socialist Party (the organisation that provided the kernel of the Communist Party of Great Britain in August 1920) which wanted to strengthen the Labour Party and help it achieve reforms through parliament.

Thanks to the work of the German and Italian left revolutionaries in 1983 have a more theoretically developed anti-parliamentary position than that elaborated by the SLP in 1921 but between the two there is a clear continuity.

THE FUTILITY OF PARLIAMENTARY POWER

Back to the power of the ballot-box! Support Labour at all bye-elections, and give the lie to the Government! Show Lloyd-George and his gang that something is happening in the country! Enable the courageous Labour Party to block the business in the House until the unemployed get justice!

The latest paper decisions of the Labour Party gives rise to these sentiments.

It is not so very long since the same type of persons were telling the workers that they could not take from industry more than they put into it, and that by producing more they would get more; that unemployment is due to underconsumption; and that the workers should attack the cost of living because of a "vicious circle" in wages and prices. Now they complain for their weakness and jelly-fish character by telling the workers that the personnel of the House of Commons is just as they have made it. We are inclined to agree; if it were otherwise, most of the Labour men would either be with the Liberals, Coalitionists, or some other brand of capitalist party or else they would be still in the workshop working for their living. Many of the Labourists are in Parliament through the good graces of the capitalists in any case, and daren't act against Capitalism. Yet these are the men who constitute the party to which the "Communists" seek affiliation. Opportunism takes some curious twists. In any case, it is not a mere matter of party power, let alone class power, but one of expediency. The Labour Party is not a class organisation and never has been. It is, and always has been, a bourgeois political organisation of reformism. It has no class war basis, and the capitalists could place it in power during one month and discredit it by another.

Yet the vain, self-important Communists talk about helping the Labour Party into power in order to prove its uselessness, and then the masses will sway over to them! To them indeed. To whom, may we ask? To men who have not the courage of their own convictions? To a party that does not know its own mind because it thinks in a hundred and one different minds? To an organisation which fails to tell the workers exactly what their relations with the Labour Party are, and if they still want to affiliate thereto? To a party which has let down the revolutionary element in favour of a reformist element? To a body whose propaganda consists of stunts, lavish advertisements and a plentiful supply of money? We are afraid not. We are not going to win in that way. Our battle with the Labour Party is one between Reformism and Revolution; between class war and bourgeois social solidarity; between Marxism and Constitutionalism. Parliamentary power is futile. The only real power is economic power, and that forces the class struggle upon us. This struggle we must face.

REVOLUTIONARY MARXISM

As Revolutionaries we must know where we stand and with whom we are fighting. Revolution is not a thing that can be brought in by a trick or by mere wriggling like finding out the secret of a Chinese puzzle. Nor can it be done with manifestoes and exclamations especially when these do not even convey correct economics and are signed by persons who fail to back up by deeds what they express in words. The elements of revolutionary progress in this country still points to the real need for Revolutionary Marxism; and the first thing we require is a class conscious working class. Unless the real power and desire comes from the ranks of the workers themselves revolution is hopeless. It must be strong and real and lasting. Hence we must educate the masses, and point out to them the message of our doctrine. Today they are being carried away with false hopes, and the great mass are totally indifferent and bewildered. To us the main principles of Revolutionary Marxism are in the following form:

To advocate the doctrines of class struggle.

To advocate revolutionary, industrial consciousness.

To advocate revolutionary, political action.

To teach the principles of Marxian economics and philosophy of history.

To stand clearly opposed to bourgeois Parliamentarism and the principles of reformism.

To clearly advocate that the political function of Labour is to crush Capitalism.

That the industrial power of Labour must back up its political power.

That the elements of revolution, its requirements and its probable characteristics, must be scientifically explained.

That the workers must be taught to think in terms of class struggle and Social Revolution.

These are some of the aspects of Revolutionary Marxism which impose themselves upon the workers who are now in the vanguard of Labour.

All power to the working class!

Such is the message of Marxism.

Note. In the above text the writer makes a sharp distinction between Labour and the 'Labour Party'. By the former he means the power of the organised working class and by the latter the bourgeois political party. Readers today in an era where, in Britain at least, the former is rarely used and where 'Labour' almost always refers to the Party should not imagine that Clunie has any illusions about the Labour Party. When he talks of the industrial power of Labour he is speaking about the power of the working class AS OPPOSED TO the the bourgeois reformism of the Labour Party.