

CHAPTER XI

CAN THE WORKERS LEAD A PEOPLE'S MOVEMENT?

MANY people, who to some extent agree with the Communist criticism of the present social order, question our insistence that the working class is the main instrument by which socialism can be achieved. A typical expression of this attitude is contained in this letter from a sympathetic engineer:

"I can't agree with your idealization of the workers, nor with your dogmatic insistence upon forcing ignorant working class leadership upon the intelligent, skilled, trained middle class. The only possibility of achieving the new society is under the leadership of the engineers and technicians."

The answers to this question involve an explanation of the class structure of capitalist society, the role of the different classes and their relations to one another. It is necessary to understand the role of classes as a whole and their function in society. From this standpoint we can judge the individual in relation to his class. It is not a question of the superior training of the individual technician as contrasted with the general lack of technical training of the industrial worker outside of a specialized job, although, with increasing specialization, the differences in technical training between the skilled worker and the junior technician grow increasingly smaller.

What do we mean by the class structure of capitalist society? There is a division of groups in society which flows

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from their relations to the processes of production. There is a small group that owns the means of production, the factories, mines, mills, machinery and all the other productive instruments of modern society. This is the capitalist class. Within this class the real power rests in the hands of a tiny nucleus of the very largest capitalists (the ruling oligarchy of bankers and industrialists), who through their vast personal fortunes and through financial control of the biggest corporations, by means of interlocking directorates, etc., control 80 to 90 per cent of all the instruments of production. Thus the handful of persons in the Morgan and Rockefeller groups control more than 50 percent of the corporate wealth of this country. Some five hundred of the richest families in the country literally own or control the productive wealth of the entire land. At the other end of the scale, 75 per cent of American families in 1935 were barely able to earn a living that afforded them a minimum standard of decency, or were below the poverty line.

In contrast to the capitalists, who own the means of production, are the workers, who own nothing but their capacity for productive labor, and who depend for their livelihood on wages. The working class, which produces the wealth of capitalist society, is the largest single group of the population of every big capitalist country. In the United States, wage and clerical workers constitute between 70 and 75 percent of the gainfully employed, an overwhelming majority. As distinct from the capitalists, the workers own no productive capital. They have a little personal property in the form of meager household goods, homes (most of them heavily mortgaged), second-hand cars, etc. For all practical purposes, however, the working class is propertyless.

This general characterization was not to any appreciable degree modified by certain pre-crisis practices of corporations, who forced their workers to purchase stock on the installment

plan, savings accounts, insurance policies, etc. These forms of property-holding among the working class were relatively small as the studies of bourgeois economists have shown, and in their aggregate totaled no more than the accumulation of a few weeks' wages for the working class as a whole. Since the crisis, what little savings the workers accumulated have been swallowed up by the ravages of unemployment. Their homes have in most cases been taken away. Marx's scientific definition of the proletariat—the class of propertyless industrial workers—was never more true than in the United States today.

Like certain groups within the capitalist class, some sections of the working class occupy a more strategic position in relation to the productive system and hence to the class struggle. These more important groups are the workers in the basic and mass production industries, such as iron and steel, coal, automobiles, machine manufacturing, building, transportation, etc. They play the decisive role in production and in the class struggle. Without their leading participation there can be no successful struggle against fascism and war, and ultimately there can be no successful overthrow of capitalism.

Between these two basic classes, the small ruling class of capitalists at the top of the social heap, who own most of the productive instruments, and the propertyless wage workers, at the bottom of the social scale, there is a series of intermediate social groups popularly called the middle class. Actually, the so-called middle class is not a homogeneous social class like the workers, who have the same economic interests. There is a whole series of intermediate groups spreading over a wide range of economic function and status. In its upper layers the middle class merges with the capitalists; its lower layers are being continuously proletarianized and thrust down into the working class.

The largest intermediate group is that of the farmers. Even

they, however, when taken as a whole cannot be considered a homogeneous class, for they are subdivided into at least three main groups. First, there are the rich and well-to-do farmers, the upper circles of which merge directly with the capitalist class. They are essentially capitalists working entirely with the labor of agricultural wage workers upon a highly mechanized basis, the type of farming that could be called agrarian factory production; or they own huge tracts of land, as in the Southern cotton belt, which they rent out to tenants and sharecroppers. The bottom rungs of this group of rich farmers are those who work their own farms, but who depend upon hired labor for the major part. This entire group of rich farmers is essentially capitalistic in its whole make-up and outlook. It is bound by a thousand ties with the existing system and with monopoly capital, which is increasingly penetrating the agrarian field. This group cannot operate independently; it is only an auxiliary wheel to monopoly capital.

The middle group of farmers comprises those small farm-owners who utilize mainly their own labor and that of their families. Most of them own their farms (subject to a growing mortgage debt) and up till now have enjoyed certain minimum living standards. These farmers vacillate between allegiance to capitalism, to which they are bound by dependence on the banks and monopolies for markets and loans, and alliance on certain issues with the poor farmers and workers, since many of them have been impoverished and have even lost their farms as the result of the agricultural crisis which dates back to the end of the war.

The third and largest group is the poor and tenant farmers. At least half of the American farmers in 1935 no longer owned their own farms, but worked them as tenants or sharecroppers. Tenancy is steadily increasing as large groups of farmers, both middle and poor, lose their farms to the banks, insurance

companies and mortgage sharks. Of this group the Roosevelt administration declares that two million are superfluous, and have no place in capitalist economy. The interests of these poor farmers dovetail with those of the working class, and they should be a component part of any political coalition against the capitalists.

The urban middle classes are composed of a kaleidoscopic maze of small storekeepers, professionals, intellectuals, teachers, preachers, technicians, office and corporation personnel, etc. Their economic status ranges all the way from the highly paid psycho-analyst, who attends the neurotic wives of the rich, and the well-paid efficiency expert, down to the poorly-paid school teacher, doctor and petty shopkeeper, whose economic status in many cases is even lower than that of the manual worker. The outstanding characteristic of these urban groups is their wide variety of economic interests. The upper middle class groups are part of the ruling class set-up. The lower middle class groups are exploited and oppressed by the capitalists, and their economic interests make them the natural allies of the workers. Hence, there is no economic basis for the building of middle class solidarity or for achieving middle class goals.

Examining the class set-up in capitalist society it is not difficult to predict the position of each class and group with regard to the main question of the day: the abolition of capitalism and the erection of a socialist society. The capitalist class as a whole, together with those sections of the middle class in the upper brackets most closely allied to it, will fight to the death against any new social order which would, of course, deprive them of their vested interests and special privileges. On the other hand, the working class and, above all, the workers in basic and large-scale industry, have the least to lose from the end of the present system and everything to

gain from a new socialist society. The lower middle classes, although more susceptible to capitalist influence than the workers, are driven by the decline of capitalism, which proletarianizes them, to align themselves more and more with the workers, in a common fight to win economic security. And, of course, large sections of the middle classes inevitably, because of the nature of their class position, are unable to see any clear and consistent course. They, therefore, hesitate and vacillate between the two fundamental classes in capitalist society.

This class analysis of our present social order shows how utopian it is to expect these middle class groupings to lead the struggle for a socialist society. We have seen how false is the notion propagated by certain middle class intellectuals that it is the so-called middle class which is the largest group in American society. It is the working class which outnumbered the other groups almost three to one and at the same time has a homogeneity of interests that the middle class never had and never can have.

Let us examine in more detail one of those middle class groups which have been nominated for the leading post in the anti-capitalist fight by some who want to be their spokesmen, namely, the engineers and technicians. The idea of the engineer-leader was first put forward by Thorstein Veblen toward the end of the World War. But even at that time, Veblen himself realized that the engineers as a group could not play the leading role. His projected "Soviet of Engineers" as he later put it was a combination of the most advanced technicians with the main body of the working class. Unrealistic as Veblen's dream was, he should not be blamed for the recurrent vulgarization of his suggestion by middle class intellectuals which reached its most fantastic form in the ballyhoo of the technocrats.

The mixed composition of the middle classes is as true for the technicians as for the other intermediate groups. There are highly-paid engineers receiving big salaries and there are junior technicians whose earnings even before the crisis were no greater than that of a skilled worker. Since 1929 the overwhelming majority of these technicians have been discarded by American capitalism as so much scrap. A survey by Columbia University indicated that 65 percent of chemists, 85 percent of engineers, and 95 percent of architects were unemployed in 1934. Many of them have had to become taxi-drivers, hotel doormen, waiters, etc., displacing former workers. The largest part of them are subsisting on relief or on the "made" work of the WPA or some other alphabetic concoction. Far from seeing any tendency among the politically advanced and most impoverished of these technicians to come forward in any independent role, we see growing recognition on the part of many of them that their only future lies in aligning themselves with the working class, which is the main class force fighting for a new society where technical skill will be utilized—and not penalized. The only bid for "independence" of technicians is the travesty of "technocracy". This phenomenon points in the direction of fascism. For the fight of the de-classed middle class elements can take place only within the reactionary orbit of the capitalists who wish to employ them against labor, or within the orbit of labor in a fight against the capitalists for a new social order. The independence of the technocrats was one of name only, as would be the so-called independence of any other middle class movement that set itself against the workers. It is in the interests of the reactionaries to boost these false claims of middle class intellectuals, in an attempt to use middle class people against their natural allies—the workers.

From this class analysis of capitalist society it is obvious the

Communists are not guilty of "dogmatic insistence" when they say that it is the working class which must lead the anti-fascist and anti-capitalist fight. The necessity for working class leadership in the struggle against fascism and for socialism does not arise out of any dogma; it is a necessity dictated by the very nature of our present class society. It is a necessity not only for the workers, but for all those who want to bring into action the most powerful forces on the side of socialism, that the working class lead the class battles against the capitalists. Thus, working class leadership is not a demand put forward by the workers through some narrow conception of their own class interests; without working class leadership socialism cannot be achieved. There is no other class that has the latent strength, revolutionary will and clear-cut goal which will create socialism out of capitalist chaos.

This does not mean that Marx and Lenin, who worked out the theory of the hegemony of the proletariat in the socialist revolution, assigned to the working class a closed monopoly on the work of carrying through this social transformation. The Marxist-Leninist theory of the role of the working class is not that of *monopoly*, but of *hegemony* in the revolution. These are two distinct conceptions. The Communist idea of the leading role of the working class does not exclude other class groupings from participation in the revolution. On the contrary, it points out that there must be the active participation of all the exploited and impoverished masses of people in the revolution, together with and *under the leadership* of the working class.

The first and most important implication that flows from this policy is the necessary alliance between the workers and the main body of farmers who have been impoverished by capitalism. The second implication is that the members of the lower middle class—professional, intellectual, shop-keeper—

who are being ruined by capitalist society, and who have nothing to look forward to but an increasing burden of suffering, are also natural allies of the workers. The third implication is that individuals from all classes who are able to rise above their narrow class interests and understand the working out of the processes of history will break with their class, join the revolutionary workers as allies, and even identify themselves and merge with the working class. This holds true even of individuals from the higher circles of the ruling class itself. To some extent we see this taking place today, verifying what Marx and Engels first pointed out in this connection in 1847.

In conclusion, we can say that Communists do not deny the value and significance of individuals and groups from other classes. We value very highly those honest individuals from other classes who join the ranks of the workers. It is true that we do not fall upon the neck of everyone who comes to us from the enemy class; we do not immediately hand over the leadership of the revolutionary movement to such individuals even though they may hold Ph.D. degrees. In fact, at the outset we are even suspicious of some of these people, because we have found through sad experience that many have come to our movement, not through basic understanding, but through temporary moods and sentimental ideas. Such persons who know not where they go have no value or significance, beyond the moment, for the revolutionary movement. But those individuals who come to the revolutionary movement with the understanding of the historic necessity for abolishing capitalism, who are ready to subordinate themselves to, and identify themselves with the only completely revolutionary class in society, are able to make important and lasting contributions to the cause of socialism. In fact, scientific socialism was founded by two such people—Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.