
An Opinion on Tactics.

by Max Eastman

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Two years have passed since the Triple convention at Chicago when the revolutionists in the American Socialist Party split from the political and social reformers. Two years have passed, and except for the deepening and confirming of that split, nothing of appreciable value to the cause of communism has been done by the revolutionists. A good deal has been done to the detriment of the cause. In spite of an “increasing misery” that surpasses the demands of any theory, the workers in America seem to be less friendly to communism than they were two years ago.

To my mind the cause of the state of affairs is simple and obvious. It will be remembered that the first sentence of the original manifesto from Moscow, and the premise upon which all the tactics of the Third International have been based, was that “The present is the period of the breakdown of capitalism.” This statement is not true of the United States in the same immediate sense that it may be true of Europe. We are not in the period of the breakdown of capitalism, and yet we are employing tactics that could never be appropriate in any other period — tactics which have no practical relation to the period we are in — that of preliminary propaganda.

The Communist Parties have been stressing the idea of party discipline to a degree that would seem sensible to a matter-of-fact person only in an army on the eve of battle. They have been taunting the “white terror,” and exaggerating it, and making it as bad in reality as well as in their imagi-



nation, instead of trying to revive the opportunities that formerly existed here for a fundamentally revolutionary propaganda. They have formed an elaborately conspiratorial organization excellently adapted to promote treasonable and seditious enterprises, although they have no such enterprises on foot. The folly of this policy becomes tragically apparent when members of this underground organization defend themselves in court with the eloquent and perfectly truthful assertion that they are conducting is not in violation of the laws. It becomes still more tragically apparent, when they resort to the distribution of circulars advocating methods of terrorism — “Social Revolutionary” and not Communist circulars — for the mere purpose, so far as we can judge, of sustaining and justifying the illegality of their organization. It was something of a patriotic boast upon the part of the American delegates to Moscow that the United States is the only country in the world where the communist movement as such is an underground movement. And although America is in fact ruthless and savage, untamed either by law or culture — America is a nation of the descendants of black sheep, of people who left home — nevertheless this boast is really unjustified. It is not so much the ruthlessness of the American capitalists, as the romanticism of the American communists, which accounts for their being underground. The majority of their leaders want to be underground. They enjoy disciplining the devotees of a rebellion, but educating the workers for the revolution is a less interesting task, and they are not fulfilling it.

A certain plausible excuse for this state of affairs is found in the history of the Bolshevik Party in Russia. It was upon the issue of centralization, or party discipline, that this group split from the Mensheviks in 1903, and from that early time the policy of the party was to attend more to the qual-

ity than the quantity of its membership. But the success of the Bolsheviks in leading the revolution of 1917 does not certify the correctness, and much less the adequacy, of all their previous policies in preparing the ground for that revolution even in Russia. Four or five other parties were helping them in that. And even so far as their policy is confirmed as a correct and adequate one for Russia under the Tsar, where every manifestation of political consciousness among the people was revolutionary, and an actual revolution at least of a political nature was constantly impending, it does not follow that this policy is correct and adequate for political “democracies,” where revolution is the last thing natural to the minds of the workers even when politically alive and insurgent.

The task immediately before us is to persuade and educate the workers of America, or at least an appreciable vanguard of them, away from an habitual and fixed faith in the forms of bourgeois democracy, towards an understanding of the underlying economic facts, and a faith in the principles of the revolution. We cannot accomplish this through an organization which has to justify itself by a pretense that those forms are worse than they are. Lenin himself in his pamphlet on *The Infantile Sickness of Leftism in Communism*, remarks that the Russian experience cannot be taken without reservations as a model for revolutionary policy in other countries.† There are differences. And the most pronounced of them, so far as concerns the period of preliminary propaganda, is the fact that Russia had not had a bourgeois revolution, and we have. In consequence of this, the idea of an illegal conspiracy was not peculiar in Russia to proletarians, or to those who understood the economics of history; it was, if not familiar, at least obviously sensible and practical to all democrats or libertarians of whatever class or persuasion. They were merely to follow the example of other peoples

† “One must admit some fundamental features of our revolution to be of such international significance. Of course it would be the greatest mistake to exaggerate this truth; and to apply it to more than the fundamental features of our revolution.” (p.3)

oppressed by a despot. To make that idea an essential part of the general propaganda of communism in a country as complacent of its democracy, and as far from critical and conscious struggle of classes as the United States, seems to me to ignore the essential difference between the two situations.

There were always two sides to Lenin's policy — one was to adhere loyally to the pure revolutionary truth, the other was to adhere loyally to the mass of the workers. The latter policy cannot be vigorously fulfilled by an underground organization in the United States, nor by an organization operated from underground. And with a little patience and good engineering the former policy can be fulfilled by a legal organization. That has been the opinion of a good many revolutionists in the United States, and as the party literature is now moving in the same direction, and as the executives of the Third International at least deplore what they consider the temporary necessity of an underground party in this country, it seems an opportune time to express it clearly.

It was thanks to the infantile disease of "Leftism" — not at that time identified — that the Left Wing Movement lost the Socialist Party in Chicago. It lost the Socialist Party and failed to form a Communist Party. It formed two half parties, or half-dead parties — one of them stagnant with complacency over its own theological perfection, and the other not sure enough of itself to act. And it is thanks to this same disease that these two parties in their amalgamation have produced little

more than a lively underground debating society. As I understand it the very purpose of Lenin's great pamphlet in which he isolated the germs and identified the symptoms of infantile Leftism, is to obviate the waste involved in such interminable debates. Those pure and perfect theologians of Bolshevism, whose only purpose is to establish in this country a secret brotherhood of revolutionary saints, have to be dropped aside with the same resolute practicality with which the sentimental socialists have been dropped. That is the present task. And it is to be hoped that those in the party who now evidently perceive it, will have the courage to carry it through. We shall see then the beginnings of some practical progress. The fact that we are not facing an early breakdown of capitalism will be recognized, the special requirements of propaganda in a working-class peculiarly convinced of the beneficence of an existing "democracy" will be studied, and one of the first results of that study, in my opinion, will be the development of an independent legal communist party and press such as exists in England. We are not advocating an insurrection, and there is no law against our teaching the American workers that economic and non-political forces control the operation of governments and the course of history. There is no law against our forming an organization that will save at least a portion of those workers from sinking into the swamp of laborism and yellow socialism. That is what we are failing to do.

Edited by Mitch Abidor.

*Basic image of Max Eastman from a photograph by Arnold Genthe, altered by Tim Davenport.
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