
That Centrist!

by Max Bedacht
[“James A. Marshall”]

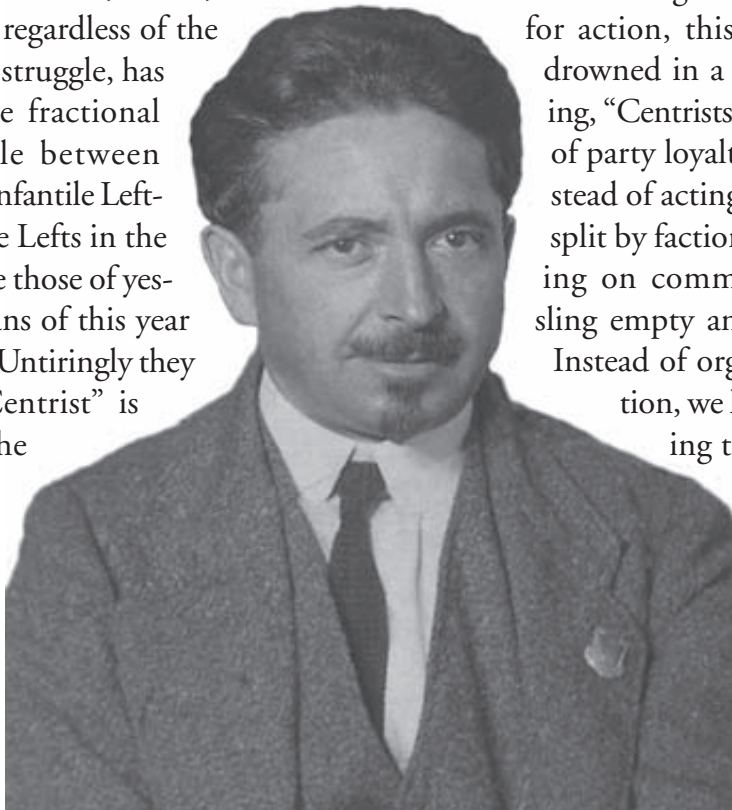
Published in *The Communist* [New York: unified CPA], v. 1, no. 9 (July 1922), pp. 3-5.

The Communist movement of the United States for 3 years of its existence has been cursed by an internal struggle. Division in its ranks has paralyzed its activities during all this time. This condition of our movement reflects the low stage of the class struggle of the United States. To apply revolutionary tactics in the present stage of the class struggle, we must use slogans and demand which differ greatly from those abstractions which the “100 Percenters” in our party would advocate. This difference between the use of realistic slogans, which conform to the actual class struggle, and the propagation of abstract, lifeless, academic, official dogma regardless of the conditions of the class struggle, has been the cause of the fractional strife — the struggle between Marxian Realism and Infantile Leftism. The slogans of the Lefts in the United States today are those of yesterday; and their slogans of this year are those of yesteryear. Untiringly they shout, “Centrist!” “Centrist” is the name given to the “revolutionists by hesitation” as congregated in the 2-1/2 International. It is a fighting slogan against *enemies of the Proletarian Revolution*. The American

“Leftists” have made a fighting slogan out of it *against the enemies of their illusions*. How hallowed that phrase is I realize best when I consider that during a considerable period of the time that I have had this epithet hurled at me, I was afflicted with a serious case of “Leftitis.”

If the misuse of that phrase would not have been the cause of utterly disorganizing the party, there would be no reason for discussing the matter. But since one part of the party is constantly at the throat of another it has become necessary to deal with the question seriously. The minute the throttled ones get a breathing spell to call for action, this sound is immediately drowned in a chorus of voices shouting, “Centrists! CENTRISTS!” Instead of party loyalty, we have mistrust. Instead of acting as a unit, our ranks are split by factionalism. Instead of carrying on communist propaganda, we sling empty and meaningless phrases. Instead of organizing communist action, we have been carefully nursing the germ of infantile paralysis.

Who is Centrist? The chorus of Leftists give answer: “A Centrist is one who does not believe as we do.” But this answer is either demagoguery or ig-



norance. And yet, this is what the saviors of communism mean — whatever they have stowed away in their brain-chamber is the eternal truth, is the last word in communism — and whoever disagrees with them is either a Centrist or a Menshevik.

A Centrist is one who “believes” in the proletarian revolution — but condemns the means by which it must be accomplished.

In any class society one class rules, exploits, and oppresses the other class. The capitalist class is doing that now with the working class. The state is its instrument of rule and suppression. The capitalist state, whether monarchy or republic, is a disguised dictatorship of the capitalist class. Through the powers of the state the capitalist class tries to perpetuate its rule and make exploitation a permanent institution. The working class must wrest that instrument of a capitalist dictatorship — the state — from the hands of the capitalists, must destroy its machinery of capitalist rule, and must establish in its place a proletarian dictatorship for the suppression of the capitalist class. This dictatorship will not be a permanent one. It aims at the abolition of classes and consequently at the abolition of class rule and the state. This is the aim of communism; whoever believes in this, whoever works for this and is willing to take the consequences of his action is a communist.

But here I see the witch-hunters in the party fall all over themselves in a rush against me. I hear them shouting as they rush: “Centrist! CENTRIST!” No ordinary mortal in the Communist International can suspect why. Only 3 years training in the American Communist movement can sharpen one’s senses so that one can perceive of such fine points. I wrote: “The working class must wrest the instrument of capitalist dictatorship — the state — from the hands of the capitalists.” “Centrist,” they howl, “why don’t you say by means of ‘armed insurrection’ or ‘through force, violence — and other unlawful means?’” These phrases are the test of 100 Percentism. Mind you it is not the belief in the eventual necessity of armed

force that is in question. It is the willingness to shout it from the housetops here, there, everywhere; now, tomorrow, anytime. Not dictatorship through soviets is the essence of our immediate revolutionary aim, but the parrot-like repetition of the phrase “armed insurrection.”

My “Centrist” tendency has made me shameless enough to admit that if during a crisis a peculiar constellation of conditions would enable the American working class to take power through its councils built up in this crisis, as was the case, for instance, in Hungary and Bavaria, I would not hesitate a second to advocate the taking of power, although the taking of power by other than the means of “armed insurrection” has been decreed a crime against Communism by our American “Leftists.” Of course I would also suggest as the first act of power of these councils the immediate disarming of the bourgeoisie and its army, and the arming of the proletariat and formation of its red army. My “Centrist” sense tells me, however, that with that willingness to resort to armed force I cannot win back the good opinion of our more than 100 Percenters, because my proposal would no longer mean conquest of power, but defense of power.

Now I do not in the least pretend that that is the way workers will get power. But that is not essential. The essential point is that the proletarian dictatorship exercised through workers councils must be the instrument of the proletarian revolution, and that such a dictatorship — a proletarian state — must supercede the capitalist dictatorship, the capitalist state. The communist will work for this. Consistently and systematically he will help develop the class struggle to the point where the working class will wrest the state from the hands of the capitalists and set up its own dictatorship. Never losing sight of this aim he will propose to the working masses at all times the use of *such means in the struggle as the stage of the struggle and its immediate object require*. After he has succeeded in developing the struggles of groups of workers into mass struggles of the proletariat, and

when he sees the mass action of the proletariat sufficiently dominated by revolutionary spirit and leadership, and when the class struggle has reached a revolutionary crisis, he will suggest, propagate, and organize the conquest of the state by the organization of workers' councils; by taking on the functions of government for the working class through the councils, by arming the proletariat for the conflict which will be the inevitable outcome of this revolutionary action either the day before the taking of complete power as a means of conquest, or the day after the taking of complete power as a means of defense of power and suppression of the capitalist class. Arms will be used not as a matter of principle, but as a matter of necessity.

To make the phrase "overthrow by armed force" or "armed insurrection" the test of Communist understanding is nothing but an admission of lack of such understanding. But when the open existence of the Communist Party is at stake, then the insistence of this phrase in the program is little short of lunacy. At least half of the sections of the Communist International have nothing like it in their program. Radek closes his answer to Kautsky on the question of terrorism with the words of the Chartists: "We will achieve our aims peacefully, if possible, but forcibly if necessary." The historical experience of the proletariat teaches them that force will be necessary: it depends on the bourgeoisie whether it will or not.

Now that I have opened my "Centrist" heart on this point, waiting for all the 100% Shylocks to claim their pound of it, I proceed to other sides of the question of "What is a Centrist?"

A Centrist does not believe in centralization and discipline. How about that in our party? We find that many of those who only lately joined the chorus of "Centrist" shouters and who want to make up for their past deficiency by shouting loudest, having done everything to destroy centralization and discipline. They have set up separate organizations within the party with separate connec-

tions, etc., thus aiming a blow at centralization. They have used everything from typographical errors in party publications to the sending of speakers or reporters they did not like, to stage protest actions, pass protest resolutions, create and systematically organize dissatisfaction for one purpose and one only: To destroy party discipline and then go fishing in the chaos thus created. Any defense against an accusation of Centrism from these quarters must convert itself into an accusation against the accusers. Their cry of "Centrism" is only a variation of the old trick of "stop thief."

The Centrist also abhors action. His slogan is at all times "first organization." Certainly, organization is necessary. But with the nucleus of the organization established, action becomes the order of the day for that body. The organization can not enlarge and strengthen itself merely FOR action, but it must do that IN action. And action of the advance guard of the revolutionary proletariat is not the shouting of phrases and slogans, abstract and meaningless if not related to the immediate problems of the struggle. The Communist Party program must determine the party's course of action. But never must the action of the party exhaust itself in a mere propagation of its program. This mistake is commonly made not by those accused of being Centrists in our party, but by their accusers.

Lately the question of so-called liquidation of the No. 1 [underground CPA] has become the real and pretended cause for much display of energy by the "Centrist"-shouting chorus. Most of this is mere demagogy. As one of those accused, I challenge the whole congregation of the chorus to prove — not to me, but to the Communist International — that it is "liquidation" and "Centrism" to claim:

1. That 3/4 of the sections of the Communist International are open parties.
2. That the CPA was formed as an open party and went underground not as a matter of revolutionary virtue, but as a matter of necessity.

3. That only as long as that necessity exists must it continue such exclusive underground existence.

4. That the CPA cannot accomplish its task in America through the underground organization and must for that reason create open instruments.

5. That through such instruments *the party must consistently and diligently work its way back out in the open again.*

6. That this task can be accomplished best by extending the activities, enlarging the functions, and clarifying the program of its open instrument.

7. That when the possibility of an open existence of the CPA is established by the actual practice of the open instrument, *the reestablishment of the CPA as an open party becomes an imperative duty.*

8. That in the same degree as the CPA will function more and more through its open instrument it will lose the character of a separate political party and will become solely the directing force of the open organization.

9. That by the time the CPA can become an

open party the original apparent dualism of open and underground organizations must have transformed itself into an unquestionable entity [unity?]. Partly through the absorption of the best elements of LPP, partly through the permeation of LPP with its understanding, spirit, and leadership, the CPA must have established itself so securely within its own open instrument that the CPA and its open apparatus are in appearance and in reality one and the same thing.

10. That the open CPA comply in organization and action to the 21 points and be openly affiliated with the Communist International.

This is my program. If that be "Centrism," if that be "liquidation," make the best of it. But remember, the Communist International will say the last word in this question as it has done so before in a similar question.

Comrades! The issue is not "Centrism," but "LEFTISM." The slogan cannot be and must not be, therefore, "Centrism," but common sense, REASON!

Edited by Tim Davenport.

Published by 1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR, 2007. • Non-commercial reproduction permitted.