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# Parliamentarism.

by John Pepper

Published in *The Daily Worker* [Chicago], v. 1, whole no. 329 (Feb. 2, 1924), section 2, pp. 1, 8.

The Communist Party of Italy called upon the Communist deputy Bombacci to resign his place, and declared that Bombacci is no longer worthy of the confidence of the Party and of the working class.

The Communist Party of Bulgaria expelled the Communist deputy, Dr. Nikola Sakharov, from the Party and called upon him to resign his place.

These two recent events within the Communist International bring up again the question of Parliamentarism. The opponents of participation in the bourgeois parliaments will try again to find arguments against the tactics of the Communist International. They will tell how Bombacci behaved as a lackey in parliament and not as a revolutionary, that at the occasion of the discussion on trade relations between Italy and Russia, he praised Mussolini and forgot all proletarian pride. The opponents of participation in parliaments will tell with anger how Nikola Sakharov in the parliament of the counterrevolution in Bulgaria showed himself a renegade, that he slandered shamefully the heroic September [1923] uprising of the Bulgarian workers and peasants.

One swallow doesn't make a summer. One or two renegades do not make a winter, do not necessitate the revision of the tactics of the Communist International.

## **New Communist Experiences.**

The Communist International has always

made a sharp division between opportunist parliamentarism and revolutionary parliamentarism. It criticized the opportunist parliamentarism of the Social Democrats and at the same time it built up the tactic of revolutionary parliamentarism. Lenin and the Russian Bolsheviks were the first party which exposed and showed their contempt for the practice of opportunist parliamentarism, but at the same time they waged the first fight against all Syndicalist, IWW, and so-called Left Communist elements, which rejected parliamentarism as a matter of principle.

The situation in the Communist International today is such that all the great Communist parties participate in the various election fights and in the various parliaments. The German, the French, the Czechoslovak, the Italian, the Bulgarian, the Polish Communist Parties — legal or illegal, and the countries which are at greatly varying stages of development, all have their Communist fractions in parliament. The French Communists have proven that they have understood how to use their places in parliament against imperialism and the Ruhr invasion for practical antimilitarism. The Polish Communist fraction in parliament has become one of the most important legal expressions of the illegal party. The German Communist fraction of parliament at the moment of dissolution of the Communist Party issued its declaration in the Reichstag, the real revolutionary slogan: "The Communist Reichstag fraction calls upon the workers to prepare for the decisive struggle. The uprising of the working class is the

only deed that can save the German people. In the struggle against military dictatorship we will prepare the armed uprising, and the victory of the proletarian dictatorship.”

The various Congresses of the Communist International and the implacable fight of Lenin in his various writings against revolutionary phrases and for revolutionary realism have clarified theoretically the question of parliamentarism. The practice of the various Communist parties proves that a revolutionary parliamentarism is possible and that Dombal in Poland, Paul Froelich in Germany, Marcel Cachin in France, in their fight in parliament have become the real followers of the parliamentary activity of Karl Liebknecht and the Bolsheviki fraction in the Russian Duma. Individual comrades such as Bombacci in Italy or Sakharov in Bulgaria can fall victims to parliamentary cretinism. But the Communist International and its most important parties are today free from both, from parliamentary cretinism and anti-parliamentary cretinism.

### **The Historical Role of Parliament.**

What is the Communist conception of parliamentarism?

We all know today that the parliament in all lands is a tool of the capitalist class. The parliaments were revolutionary institutions as long as the bourgeoisie itself was revolutionary. Cromwell's parliament, the Federal Congress and Constitutional Convention of the American revolution, the French Convention were institutions of the young, revolutionary bourgeoisie against feudalism and monarchy. The capitalist development itself has turned the bourgeoisie from a revolutionary class to a reactionary class and has thereby transformed the bourgeois parliaments from tools of suppression of feudalism into tools of oppression of the working class.

Professor Charles A. Beard in his historical studies denounces the “Fathers of the American

Constitution” because there was no worker or poor farmer among them, but they were the representatives of the rich and the capitalists. Professor Beard is right. But he is wrong when he does not understand that in the period of the American revolution it was not the working class, which had not yet come into existence, or the backward provincial farmers, but the capitalists who economically and politically represented the real revolutionary class.

In our present period, in the period of the decay of capitalism turned into imperialism, the parliaments are everywhere the outspoken tools of the worst counterrevolution. The English House of Commons, the French Chamber of Deputies, the German Reichstag, and the American Congress are in equal measure nothing else than enemies of the workers and working farmers. All these parliaments are so much the more dangerous enemies of the oppressed and exploited because they appear in the mask of democracy, universal suffrage, and they awaken in this way the deceitful illusion among the workers and farmers that they represent the instrument of the rule of the masses. We Communists must therefore combat all these “democratic” parliaments as the worst and most dangerous enemies of the workers. We must expose universal suffrage and democracy as being in reality only the cloak which hides the rule of the finance oligarchy.

We must make it clear to the masses that when they elect the Senators democratically they put power into the hands of the trusts, that when they elect Coolidge President through universal suffrage they only set up the dictatorship of J. Pierpont Morgan.

But it is not enough to show the masses that Congresses and parliaments are nothing but tools of mass oppression and mass deceit, but we must also show that the workers and working farmers can never attain to rulership through parliamentary struggles, and that the rule of the laboring masses must construct new political institutions.

The political form of rule of the workers and farmers is not Congress, but workers' and farmers' councils. The bourgeois method is elections based upon geographical divisions; the proletarian method of election has its basis in economic organization, the factories, mines, mills, and farms.

The historical task of the Communists is to help to destroy the political tool of the capitalists, the parliament, and to build up the political tool of the workers, the Soviets.

### **Anti-Parliamentary and Parliamentary Cretinism.**

The question now is, how can we attain this aim?

We find two great obstacles before us. First, the government organization of the capitalist class, which defends parliamentarism with force of arms. Second, the illusion of the masses, which considers parliaments as organs of democracy.

In the working out of the correct proletarian tactic on the attitude toward parliamentarism two mistakes are possible. The first mistake (and this mistake has been made by the leftist Communists and the IWW) is that we do not reckon with the illusions of the masses and we boycott the parliaments because they are capitalist institutions. The second mistake (and this mistake was made and is made today by the Socialists) is that we share the illusions of the masses, that we consider the parliaments as tools of real democracy and we content ourselves with working in the parliaments for reforms within capitalism. As the Communist International was not born complete and through in one act, but as it is a product of historical development, and as it was built up on the one hand by Socialist elements which abandoned the Second International and on the other hand by former Syndicalists, IWWs, and anarchists, it was inevitable that both mistakes, the leftist and opportunist, are again being committed within the Communist International. Against

anti-parliamentary as well as against parliamentary cretinism, the only weapon is revolutionary Marxism, which reckons with the illusions of the masses, but does not become a victim of the illusions of the masses. Revolutionary Marxism has established the tactic that we must participate in parliaments because that is the best method to expose the parliaments and to destroy the illusions of the masses concerning them. This Marxist, realistic method has separated the small leftist groups of revolutionary phrase in Germany, England, Holland, Bulgaria from the Communist International. But the same ruthless Marxian method eliminated the opportunists of parliamentarism from the Communist International, those who tried to adapt themselves to their capitalist colleagues, as for instance Frossard in France, Bombacci in Italy, Sakharov in Bulgaria.

### **Anti-Political Tradition in the United States.**

Here in the United States we are facing a more complicated and difficult situation in the question of parliamentarism than in the other countries.

The greatest mass organization of the workers, the American Federation of Labor, has been preaching for 40 years an anti-political ideology to the masses. Its slogan is that Congress and the government should not interfere in the affairs of the workers and the workers shall take part as little as possible in politics. The American Federation of Labor is an opponent in principle of every independent Labor Party because it claims that the Labor Party would subdue the trade unions.

The IWW has in fact the same attitude towards politics as the American Federation of Labor, except that it translates Gompers' words into a revolutionary language. Gompers sets all his hopes on the direct economic opportunist action of the trade unions in collaboration with the capitalists; the IWW sets all its hopes on the direct

economic revolutionary action of the industrial unions in the struggle against the capitalists.

Against this counterrevolutionary and revolutionary anti-political attitude of the American Federation of Labor and the IWW, the Socialist Party never opposed a consistent revolutionary political tactic. The right wing of the Socialist Party (the Victor Bergers, Morris Hillquits, and Meyer Londons) have degraded and narrowed political activity into election campaigns and into parliamentary activity. The election campaigns were not utilized by them to mobilize the masses, but as a means to grab seats in Congress. The proletarian participation in Congress they did not use for revolutionary propaganda or for awakening the class consciousness of the working class, but as a means to secure small, insignificant patchwork reforms within the capitalist system.

The left wing of the Socialist Party was justly disgusted with the shallow opportunist tactics of the right wing, but out of its disgust it did not develop the correct tactic of revolutionary parliamentarism, only an anti-parliamentarism on principle. The right wing Socialists have replaced the direct action of the masses by miserable opportunist action of individual members of Congress. The left wing of the Socialist Party did not adduce the correct lessons, namely, that direct mass action in the factories, in the unions, on the streets, must be combined with a revolutionary stand in Congress and in the various state legislatures, but it rejected parliamentarism entirely without criticism, and it ridiculed all election campaigns.

The Communist Party in America has arisen out of three elements: the American Federation of Labor trade unionists, IWWs, and left wing Socialists. All these three groups were opponents

of political action altogether, or were against parliamentarism. It is therefore no wonder that the young Communist Party became a prey to anti-parliamentary cretinism and rejected all parliamentary activity.

The Workers Party of today has theoretically correctly solved the question of political action and has also allotted to election campaigns and participation in parliament their proper place within general political activity, at least in theory. But in our practice the Party is still suffering from the old American anti-political traditions of the working class. In theory our Party is for election campaigns, but in practice we have not had until now a single election campaign in which the Party on a national scale or the various party organizations on a local scale really wholeheartedly participated. The recent attempts in New York and Cleveland [local WPA electoral campaigns] have shown that we could not mobilize the Party membership for an election campaign. Our Party in this respect is like the newly-baptized Jew who carries a cross about his neck but still cannot eat pork. Our Party carries the theoretical cross of participation in election campaigns, but its anti-political instincts still reject real participation in election campaigns. The atavistic anti-political inclinations still live too strongly in our Party. It is our duty to fight against these inclinations. We hope that through the Labor Party campaign and especially through the thoroughgoing mobilization of the Party for the Presidential and Congressional elections of 1924, we can uproot the last vestiges of the freakish mixture of anti-political opportunism and anti-political revolutionary phrase from our party.

*Edited by Tim Davenport.*

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