
A Proletarian Dictatorship vs. Parliamentarism.

by Alexander Bilan

Published in *The Ohio Socialist* [Cleveland], whole no. 58 (March 5, 1919), pg. 4.

It is very evident that not only is the capitalist class convinced that parliamentarianism is the highest expression of democracy, but also a large part of the working class has accepted this view and has great doubts whether a proletarian dictatorship is the way toward democracy. These workers believe that the capture off the state power is possible through parliamentarism.

Let us see whether this can be done.

It is customary to recognize as a parliamentary form of government a government in which a majority of the people's representatives rule, having not only all legislative power but the right to make final decisions which cannot be revoked — only their execution can be delayed.

Parliamentarism can exist as well in a democracy as under a monarchy; in an autocracy as in a plutocracy. Parliamentarism is a typical form of class government. As Frederick Engels says:

The state is the result of the desire to keep down class conflict. But...it is, as a rule, the state of the most powerful economic class that by force of its economic supremacy becomes also the ruling political class and thus acquires new means of subduing and exploiting the oppressed classes. The modern representative state is the tool of the capitalist exploiters of wage labor.

The parliament in the modern state is not only the highest legislative, but also the executive power, as the executive department heads are nothing else but mere tools of the parliamentary majority. As soon as the ministry loses the support of the majority, it has to go. This is not true of the United States, in which the ministry (cabinet) is not responsible to Congress, but such is the case in every country of Europe in which parliamentary government is established.

With the majority rule of parliament there is established a dictatorship of the ministry, but this dictatorship ceases with the change of the parliamentary majority. So we see that parliamentarism places all state power — legislative, judicial, and executive — in the hands of the majority in parliament. Karl Kautsky says, "Parliamentarism by itself is an empty form, whose content is determined through the class that fills it."

Parliamentary government was the result of the struggle between the bourgeoisie and feudalism, in which the bourgeoisie was victorious. The bourgeoisie dictated the terms and set the limits of the power of the people's representatives, for at the time of the formation of the constitutions the weight of power was on their side. The bourgeoisie saw to it that real political power remained in its hands while the rest of the people were given only the smallest part in the government. As long as the bourgeois parliamentary government remains in existence it will, as a result, be a dictatorship of the capitalist class.

It is a mistake to believe that parliamentarism is a synonym for democracy. On the contrary, we find that where the parliamentary majority rules it is not democratic, and where it is approaching democracy parliamentary government becomes a weak institution.

Working class victories in parliamentary elections do not place power in the hands of the workers, nor do such victories establish democracy. Such victories serve only to bring to a head the clash of class interests, in which the dominant issue is not the number of votes but the real power of each class. The opposing force the workers will have to meet will be militarism, the archenemy of democracy. So we [see] that there is not hope of reaching true democracy through parliamentarism.

The point of view which advocates the exploitation of parliamentary elections as a method of agitation and propaganda is correct where there is no free speech, free press, and free assemblage outside of parliament. It must be admitted that even debates in parliament may serve as a means of agitation and propaganda to a limited extent, when there are no other channels to reach the masses. But if we rely upon parliamentary activity as the only source of agitation, it often happens that the agitation outside of such activity ceases or is hindered. If important topics are discussed from the proletarian standpoint in a parliament, such a discussion has a world importance, but if the same discussion is repeated over and over again outside of parliament, it loses its weight from the standpoint of agitation and proves a waste of time and energy. In parliament we have not to deal with the common people but with shrewd politicians, whose views are determined and who are representing certain political parties. No oratory can convince them for the other party. It does not matter what is laid down in the program of these different parties, their principles are based on their class interests. Even when several parties exist, with different programs (if they are in earnest), it is only because they understand their common interests in a different way. But these differences cannot last long. They cease to exist as soon as working class representatives arrive in parliament to fight for their own demands irrespective of what the bosses say about it.

As long as the working class representatives are few in number they are merely disturbers of the peace of the gay bourgeois company, to whom nobody is willing to listen unless compelled to. If the bourgeois have enough confidence in their strength and the support of the troublemakers is weak, they simply throw them out of the parliamentary body.

Things are different when the working class representatives appear in legislative bodies in larger numbers. Their votes in such cases are often decisive upon certain legislative measures. This is the stage when the class struggle in parliament begins in real earnest. It is the time when all working class parties recognize participation in parliament to gain some certain reforms, to gain a larger share of state power. At this point there arises the question as to the limits of working class participation.

The working class is denied the possibility of gaining a majority of the seats in parliament as long as the constitutions drawn by the ruling class exist. Even if in spite of these instruments they should manage to capture a majority of the seats, that would mean that they would be in a position to take over the power of the state, to which the capitalist class would never consent. To try to convince the representatives of the capitalist class of the necessity of changing constitutions, is to try to convince them to turn over the power of government. Therefore, the importance of electing able speakers to seats in parliament loses its significance.

Parliaments, day by day, are growing more tedious for the outside masses. They are becoming uninteresting "business institutions" and it is not the business of the working class representatives to make the parliamentary "swamps" interesting.

Where free press, free speech, and freedom of assemblage exist, parliamentarism has played its part, just the same as has the capitalist system on the economic field. The best agitation and propaganda forces of the working class have to be employed outside of parliament in great mass meetings.

With the further development of democracy the people seek a direct expression and this opens a broad field for mass agitation. The discussions are transferred from parliaments to the peoples' forums. These are no longer dry and uninteresting parliamentary discussions, but full of life and the people's will, which make parliaments unnecessary institutions that lay like a corpse across the road that leads to democracy. It is necessary to bury this corpse. Who is going to be the undertaker?

It is necessary that the rising power, the working class, organize as a class politically, but with the firm conviction that parliaments represent the dictatorship of the capitalist class, which must be replaced by the dictatorship of the working class. This dictatorship of the proletariat arouses the ire of the capitalist class because it abolishes all privileges and puts everybody in one class. But this dictatorship means that the power which up to now was used by one class for the oppression and exploitation of the other now becomes the means of abolishing socially unnecessary and outlived class distinction, and thus transforms the dictatorship of the proletariat into the rule of the great majority, which means true democracy.

The proletarian dictatorship will have to be exercised as a class dictatorship until all class distinctions have disappeared and all production has been concentrated into the hands of an association of the whole people. The state power will lose its political character. Political power, properly called, is merely the organized power of one class for oppressing another. The proletarian during its contest with the bourgeoisie is compelled, by force of circumstances, to organize itself as a class and by means of revolution to make itself the ruling class, and as such, to sweep away by force the old conditions of production. Along with the conditions it will have swept the conditions for existence of class antagonism and of classes generally, and it will thereby abolish its own supremacy as a class.

—*Communist Manifesto*.

Therefore, in our political struggle for capture of the state power, the supreme issue must be preparation of the proletarian minds for the conscious expression of their will, by criticizing parliamentary actions outside of parliamentary walls, preparing the workers for the *tutte finale*.

Regardless of the fact that parliaments are “stinking swamps,” we cannot cast them aside until we have gone through the various stages of their development and proved by their deeds to the working class that the most important battles of the political struggle are fought outside of the walls of parliament and that the expression of the people’s will is made through mass action and that the capture of state power is the long march under the red flag of the international Socialist republic, through the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Edited by Tim Davenport.

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