

the CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY in India

The rumblings of revolution in India and the sympathetic stirrings of the masses of all Asia have struck terror into the hearts of the rulers of society and their lackeys. To dam up this tide, or at least to channelize and direct the revolutionary storm (the philistines think this is possible!), the bourgeois apologists and socialist traitors have come forth with slogans for national liberation, freedom and independence. In India even the native bourgeoisie through its Congress Party calls for a Constituent Assembly, visualizing through this instrument the establishment of a "democratic" capitalism and a bourgeois republic.

It is not accidental that the Allied powers are so anxious today to have a "democratic" constituent assembly and parliament set up in Germany and other parts of Europe. In every case this policy rests upon the hope of arousing the masses to overthrow the existing rulers, make way for the would-be rulers, but to stop there, not to touch the socio-economic system itself, not to damage capitalism and imperialism.

For similar reasons, Wall Street favors a constituent assembly in India--as a club that will smash British rule, so that the dollar and American trade can penetrate freely. That is what American Imperialism means by a "free" India.

The opportunists and liberals cannot conceive of the coming revolution as anything but a bourgeois revolution, to develop industry and trade, remove the semi-feudal relationships in the village, create an independent peasantry owning its own land - in a word, to establish an independent capitalist nation in India, with its own national bourgeoisie that will perpetuate the exploitation and oppression of the masses, but for its own benefit. The Constituent Assembly is their road to this "orderly", "democratic", state.

CHARACTER OF THE INDIAN REVOLUTION

Abstractly, since the bourgeois national revolution has not yet taken place in India, its occurrence should be a progressive step forward in comparison to the present situation. But it is an unreal and impossible conception. History has outdated it. Imperialism will not permit it.

Modern imperialism has spread its tentacles to the four corners of the earth. The economic and financial power of the imperialist overlords has so interpenetrated the colonies, taken so dominant a control of agricultural, industrial, commercial and financial life, has so weakened and reduced the native bourgeoisie,

landlord and feudal elements, and at the same time has so intertwined their interests with each other and with those of imperialism, that a social revolution cannot help but strike at the very roots of the whole structure - imperialist and capitalist relationships that crush the masses to the point of destruction.

The revolution cannot stop at the point of an independent capitalist nation. As soon as it gets under way the recipients of its blows against the landed estates, the taxes, the debt structure, the conditions on the plantations and in the factories, and against the foreign army of occupation, will be the imperialist masters, and with them the native bourgeois and landlord forces.

Capitalism today is a closely interrelated world system. On a world scale it is rotten with decay. A bourgeois nationalist revolution in the colonies, if unable to go beyond the capitalist stage, would be still-born, unable to cope with the problems of society. The revolution will pass through many complicated agrarian and national phases, but it will go on to a proletarian revolution. Nothing else is on the order of the day.

But precisely because of the backward and relatively undeveloped economy, the proletarian revolution must take into account the specific situation in the country, the particularly the immense majority of peasants. The policy of the revolution must fit the special agrarian and democratic demands. The vast masses of the peasantry scattered in hundreds of thousands of villages constitute an intermediary class unable to follow an independent policy of its own. They must be won as allies to the proletariat, which though small in numbers, will prove the decisive leavening force in the struggle for the new society.

MARCH SEPARATELY, STRIKE TOGETHER

In the present epoch of capitalism in its death throes, the struggle for the right of self determination, for independence, is progressive if coordinated with the social revolution because it involved a struggle against imperialism. The proletariat participates in this struggle with the aim of winning the leadership of the struggle from the hands of the reactionary native bourgeoisie.

The fight for independence can have a healthy and positive meaning only insofar as it is advanced as an auxiliary to the class struggle, in order to win the peasants and petty bourgeoisie as allies to the working class, and to neutralize sections of the bourgeoisie. The slogan of the right of secession can be of use against British imperialism only on the basis of independent political and organizational action by the Indian workers and their party. Given this policy of independent action, and alliance with

the peasantry is possible in the struggle for soviet power; a goal which can be achieved only against the national colonial bourgeoisie whose concept of independence extends only to its own interests.

Insofar as the petty bourgeoisie and even the national bourgeoisie are able or are driven into struggle with British imperialism, the workers and their Party will follow the strategy of marching separately and striking together with these forces, but maintain political and organizational independence in order to drop this auxiliary policy as soon as their betrayal makes it necessary, and to fight at all times the reactionary aims of the bourgeoisie and its subservience to one or another of the imperialist powers.

An expression of this policy of marching separately and striking together is around the slogan of the constituent Assembly. In general, we may say that the attitude of revolutionists to this tactical problem is governed by the question: will agitation for the Constituent Assembly advance the revolutionary struggle or not at the specific moment. Naturally, the answer and the approach will differ, depending on the situation. Let us consider it first in regard to Europe.

THE CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY IN EUROPE

In Spain in the 1936-37 revolution a slogan for a constituent assembly could only have been reactionary, since the Spanish revolution had already passed the democratic phase. Such a slogan could not hope to arouse the masses. Furthermore, in bourgeois democratic (Loyalist) Spain there was no point in calling for a constituent assembly to establish what already existed. The problem was posed on a far higher plane: a soviet Spain or a fascist Spain.

In Europe as a whole today the masses have already gone through the period of bourgeois democracy, of national capitalist states. The Draft Program of the R.W.L., written in 1939, therefore quite correctly says:

"In fascist or countries of extreme reaction the advancing of the slogan (for a Constituent Assembly) by the reformists and "liberals" is a historical anachronism serving no revolutionary purpose. Bourgeois democracy, which must not be confused with democratic demands, is no solution for the problems of Fascism, altho the bourgeoisie can revive it for short periods, to head off the class struggle. It cannot solve the problems of the working class. The masses are already far beyond that stage. The attempt to establish a constituent assembly in fascist countries can lead only to still further disillusionment and demoralization within the masses. We fight at all times - especially under fascism - for democratic rights, for the social revolution; we fight against the democratic stage of national revolution or its establishment."

What, however, should be our policy on the Constituent Assembly in the colonial countries? We can best answer this by considering the question in two periods.

THE ASSEMBLY IN THE NON-REVOLUTIONARY PERIOD

The colonial masses who have had no experience with even formal bourgeois democracy, cannot view it in the same way as the European proletariat who have seen the old hag give birth to the monstrous offspring that now destroys their very lives.

Even though bourgeois democracy and national capitalist states are out-lived, decadent, unable to solve the major problems of society, the colonial masses still follow their bourgeois leaders. The consciousness of the masses lags far behind the hidden underlying social changes. This has been the case throughout history. The American Revolution started without any idea of "Independence". Even after the fighting began the leaders of the colonists addressed George III as their "Most Gracious Sovereign", and considered themselves "his faithful subjects". The French Revolution began with no idea of ending the monarchy: two years of revolution were necessary before Louis XVI was deposed. And how many understood the character of the Russian Revolution?

In the colonies, in the pre-revolutionary period, or after a defeated revolution (as in China after 1926-27), the slogans for democratic rights can therefore find a fertile soil in the consciousness of the masses. Especially the idea of the constituent assembly, the democratic representation of the entire people, is elementary, simple, and apt to embrace really vast popular strata. It can become a rallying cry of the masses, a slogan to develop a mass movement against imperialism.

Discussing China of that period, Trotsky wrote in the "Problems of the Chinese Revolution":

"The democratic slogans contain for a certain period not only illusions, not only deception, but also an animating historical force... The Slogans of formal democracy win over, or are capable of winning over, not only the petty bourgeois masses, but also the broad working masses, precisely because they reveal to them the possibility, essentially illusory, to oppose their will to that of the generals, the country squires, and the capitalists. The experience of the Russian Revolution shows that the proletariat... can draw behind it the peasantry fling it against the front of formal democracy embodied in the Constituent Assembly, and switch it to the rails of soviet democracy. In any case, these results were not obtained by simply opposing the soviets to the Constituent Assembly, but by drawing the masses towards the soviets while maintaining the slogans of formal democracy up to the very moment of the conquest of power and even after it."

(Trotsky argued against the "leftism" of the Stalinists who counterposed the soviets to the Constituent Assembly; his arguments apply equally well against the rightism of the present-day Cannon Trotskyites, who counterpose the Assembly to the Soviets, and propose the Assembly in place of the soviets).

Obviously, the slogan for a Constituent Assembly and democratic slogans in general can be progressive only to the extent that they become a basis for action,

not talk. Furthermore, they must be properly subordinated to the goal of the Social Revolution, to the slogans of arming the workers and peasants, the 8 hour day, the confiscation of the land, the revolutionary solution of the needs of the people. To make the Constituent Assembly the center of the struggle, that is, to elevate democratic rights above the class struggle, is to drown the useful aspects of the struggle for the Assembly in a swamp of democratic illusions, to deceive and tie the hands of the masses, and in the end to negate even the struggle for democratic rights.

IN THE REVOLUTIONARY SITUATION

India today sees her opportunity in Britain's difficulties. This is true not only for India's weak and cowardly bourgeoisie, but even more for the workers and peasants, who are forcing the pace. Under conditions of revolution, the gap between consciousness and social reality begins to close up, the masses are on the march, the problem of rallying the masses takes on new forms. The fundamental questions of the road to power pose themselves; in relation to them the Constituent Assembly occupies only a minor tactical position, even though on the surface it may at times seem to fill a primary place.

The Marxists raise as immediate slogans for action, the call for soviets, seizing the land, nationalizing the banks, industry and transport, establishing workers militias and a Red Army, arming the people, and so on.

On the other hand, the slogan for a Constituent Assembly has now been pushed forward by the Indian bourgeoisie and its Ghandis and Nehrus as a slogan in opposition to soviets, to sabotage and derail the revolution. Marxists expose the character and aim of the bourgeois agitation for the Constituent Assembly, and point out the need for action now, without waiting for the Assembly. As Lenin said in April 1917: "Life and the revolution make the Constituent Assembly recede into the background".

It is not at all inevitable that the Indian revolution must go through the parliamentary, constitutional stage. No one can say in advance just what stages and forms the revolution will pass through, how long these will last, or which will be telescoped and combined with others. If in the revolutionary situation no mass movement develops for the Constituent Assembly, as is the case now, revolutionists will take advantage of this to press all the harder for soviets and for revolutionary action.

But if a mass movement does develop, as is likely, revolutionists should participate in it - wresting the leadership from the bourgeois forces. Revolutionary participation will take the form of a demand for universal, equal, direct and secret suffrage, lowering the voting age to 18 years, and a demand of the authorities in power to immediately call the Constituent Assembly. They will expose the bourgeois propaganda for a Constituent Assembly, point out that even if convened it will be useless if the bourgeoisie controls it. They will explain to the masses that only the arming of the workers and peasants, the

building up of the soviets, the strengthening of revolutionary power, will force a call for the convening of the Constituent Assembly under the control of the people.

The experience of the Russian Revolution is of value in this connection. There, the demand for the convocation of the Constituent Assembly grew constantly. The conflict about the Assembly occupied a large place between February and November. The first Provisional Government, following the February stage of the revolution, promised the convocation of an Assembly. But it did not set a date, justly fearing that once convoked it might prove uncontrollable. The promise itself, however, acted as a spur to the demand; a movement in which the Bolsheviks participated fully, using the resistance to summoning the peoples representatives as a big point in rallying the masses against the bourgeoisie. Lenin wrote:

"Shall a Constituent Assembly be called?...Yes, and as soon as possible. Yet, to make it successful, and to have it convoked, one condition is necessary: increase the number and strengthen the power of the Soviets...organize and arm the masses. Only thus can the Assembly be assured." And "Our party...recommends the peasants...take possession of the land at once... The Constituent Assembly will work out the final laws with regard to the soil... It is out of the question to wait until the Assembly is called. We do not in any way dispute the right of the Assembly to determine in detail the final laws regarding the handing over of the land to the whole people and the forms of its administration."

Later on, in August, after the consolidation of army rule, Lenin envisaged the probability of bourgeois forces dominating the Assembly: "Unless a new revolution takes place in Russia...the Constituent Assembly either will not be convoked at all, or it will be a 'Frankfort talkfest', a feeble and useless collection of petty bourgeois mortally frightened by the war and by the prospect of the bourgeoisie 'boycotting the government'..."

Pressed, the government finally set a date for the Assembly and opened the election campaign. The Bolsheviks presented their own candidates and their own program. They saw that the Kerensky "military measures in the village obviously threaten with fraudulent fixed elections to the Assembly", and that the Kerensky convoked body would be packed. But, occurring in a time of extreme class tension, the elections provided a great opportunity to the Bolsheviks to counterpose their program to the bourgeois program. (Nor did the Bolsheviks wait for the Constituent Assembly - the conquest of power through the soviets occurred six weeks before the Assembly convened).

In Russia the elections aroused great popular interest. Other possibilities may occur in India. Where there is no real mass movement, the bourgeoisie might even, to mention an unlikely extreme, try to "sneak in" an Assembly, through hasty fixed elections based on the units of the Congress Party. A revolutionary party could correctly boycott such elections as being unrepresentative and establishing a "government" unable to cope with the needs of the people.

In Russia the Assembly, elected before the conquest of power, did not convene till after. It is not excluded that in India it may be convened by the bourgeoisie, even under conditions of dual power. Under such circumstances it could at best return a vacillating, compromising petty bourgeois majority. Under bourgeois pressure it would lay down a reactionary counter-revolutionary program. Or, under pressure of the masses, it might adopt a "liberal" program of concessions. In either case the masses would soon learn the futility of this last hope of a bourgeois solution. The Assembly would solve nothing; a crushing blow would be delivered to parliamentary illusions, clearing the road for a revolutionary solution. Revolutionists might boycott or participate in the Constituent Assembly, depending on which tactic would better advance the revolutionary struggle; but even participation would be with the aim of exposing the Assembly, of agitating for soviets and a new revolution. Under no circumstances can the Constituent Assembly stand in the way of revolutionary action and the soviet conquest of power.

By its very nature, the Constituent Assembly is a form of bourgeois state rule. Its organization and structure lead to this. The structure on which it rests, and from which it is elected, usually exists beforehand, at least in part, in the local, regional and national bourgeois organs of government. While the task of electing delegates to an Assembly that will lay down laws and policies for a new social or political order is a new function for these organs, the weight of bourgeois ideology, the electoral procedure and rules, the apparatus involved, all operate as tremendous obstacles to the revolutionary forces. More. With the bourgeoisie in power, or even under dual power, the structure lends itself to bourgeois and military pressure, to packing with right wingers. The Assembly itself, in convention assembled, will mirror this set-up by adopting a bourgeois program and delegating power to some body, or itself proceed as the executive arm.

But the revolution throws up many altogether different organs, soviets, local peasant committees, cooperatives, military units, etc. If, as in Russia, the conquest of power occurs before the Assembly convenes, the new state could, if necessary, go thru with the Assembly. It need not repeat the error of the Bolsheviks in allowing to convene an Assembly whose members had been elected long before, on the old basis. It could reorganize the whole election machinery, substitute more representative organs, and possibly eventually incorporate the Assembly with many modifications in a subordinate role into some part of the temporary peasant structure.

The main point to remember, however, is that the role of the Constituent Assembly in this period is basically reactionary, that the slogans of democracy must be the fulcrum of agitation and that even the demand for the convocation of the Constituent Assembly must be subordinated to the demand for Soviets and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.