

## Parliament or Soviet

The *Proletarian* of America for July, 1930, publishes an article under the above title by John Keracher, which contains a covert attack on our principles and policy. Although our name is not mentioned, our Declaration of Principles is quoted.

The writer opposes our contention that the workers must capture power through parliament, but he carefully abstains from putting forward a course of action himself unless we are to take his blessing of the Paris Commune and the Russian Soviet as his idea of the future course of events.

The article contains alleged statements of Marx and Engels for which, significantly enough, no reference is given. Where, however, reference is given for quotations from Marx and Engels the context of these statements will not bear the interpretation Keracher tries to foist upon them. We will deal with these statements further on.

In a paragraph near the middle of the article Keracher ties himself in a knot and incidentally destroys his case. He writes:

“Then, again, the election of working-class representatives to the parliamentary bodies (local and national), gives the proletariat an opportunity through those representatives, to combat the representatives of Capitalism at close range. Those elected representatives of the workers can take advantage of their prominent position to combat and expose the nature of capitalist legislation, and to speak to the proletariat over the heads, as it were, of their political opponents. To ‘elect its own representatives in place of the capitalists’ is also a means of hampering the capitalists in their ‘exclusive political sway’; of contesting every measure they bring forth in their own interests, and proposing measures in Parliament that would be a decided advantage to the workers, even while fully realising that the capitalist representatives, in the majority, will not permit their passage.”

Good! And when the working class has a majority in Parliament cannot they seize the State power? But Mr. Keracher is silent, wrapped in contemplation, with his gaze rivetted on Russia—which is thousands of miles away! Perhaps, in his simplicity, he thinks that when the working class have obtained a majority in Parliament the representatives should disperse to the constituencies and start forming soviets. They certainly cannot start these organisations with any success before — “the armed forces of the nation” will see to that!

In the effort to show the limitations of Parliament, Keracher, seeking for support from Marx, trots out the quotations we have dealt with over and over again in these columns, and, like other opponenets, he omits the significant context. According to Keracher Marx wrote: “The working-class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made State machinery and wield it for its own purposes.” The paragraph in *The Paris Commune*, however, which is the opening paragraph of Chapter 3, runs as follows:

“On the dawn of the 18th of March, Paris rose to the thunderburst of ‘Vive la Commune!’ What is the Commune—that sphinx so tantalising to the bourgeois mind?

‘The Proletarians of Paris’ said the Central Committee in its manifesto of the 18<sup>th</sup> of March, ‘amidst the failures and treasons of the ruling classes, have understood that the hour has struck for them to save the situation by taking into their own hands the direction of affairs.... They have understood that it is their imperious duty and absolute right to render themselves masters of their own destinies, by seizing upon the governmental power.’ But the working-class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made State machinery, and wield it for its own purposes.”

From the above it will be seen that the phrase referred to the position *after* the workers had seized governmental power. This is the point our opponents always appear to overlook. The workers must, first of all, obtain control of power; once they have obtained supremacy in the State then they will, as Marx follows on by explaining, re-organise the administration of affairs to meet their needs. In his introduction Engels also makes this position clear: “From the outset the Commune had to recognise that the working class, *having once obtained the supremacy in the State*, could not work with the old machinery of government.” (Italics ours.)

Keracher, and others like him, are putting the cart before the horse. The quotation from Marx has no bearing upon parliamentary action in the way they seek to use it.

The comparison that is sought to be made between the Paris Commune and the Bolshevik Dictatorship is curious, as the Bolsheviks have done just the opposite to what was proposed by the Communards. The Communards proposed decentralisation of control whereas the Bolsheviks have established a rigid centralisation of control in the hands of a group inside the Russian Communist Party. The Communards made all posts elective and paid all officials the same pay as an ordinary workman. The Bolsheviks have established

different grades of pay and the central group appoints the officials. Yet Keracher says:

“It [the political form of the future] must be a commune form, or Soviet form (the better known term since the Russian revolution). The Soviet government is the fully developed Commune; or, as Joseph Stalin expresses it, the Commune was ‘the Soviet in embryo’.”

This Russian Soviet that is alleged to be the shadow of our future we have repeatedly shown to be a state where frantic efforts are being made to build up a capitalist industry. We have so often given evidence of this that one illustration must suffice here. In Russia there is a large and growing class of capitalist investors drawing incomes from private trading and from investments in the co-operatives and the Russian State Loans. In 1927, the total share and reserve of capital in the Co-operatives amounted to ninety seven million pounds. In October, 1926, credits borrowed at home and abroad by the Co-operatives amounted to one hundred and eight million roubles. (*Soviet Union Year Book*, 1928, p.183 and 193). State Loans in Russia are used exclusively for financing industry, and by February, 1930, had reached nearly 300 million pounds. (*Review of the Bank of Russian Trade*, May, 1930). The interest on these loans averages about 10% What is the difference between this and Western capitalism?

Is this a lopping-off of the worst features of the State-as the Commune did?

Keracher attempts to wave aside a paragraph in our Declaration of Principles on the ground that it is opposed to the phrase from Marx, relating to the laying hold of the ready-made State machinery. After quoting the sixth paragraph in our Declaration of Principles he goes on to say:

“Marx and Engels, whenever they wrote in relation to the State, took pains to point out that this is just the thing the working-class cannot do. The working-class cannot use ‘this machinery, including these forces’, for the working-class ‘emancipation and the overthrow of privilege.’ When writing on the Commune, Marx tells with approval of ‘the suppression of the standing army, and the substitution for it of the armed people.’ In other words, it was not ‘this machinery, including these forces’ that were to be wielded as an ‘agent of emancipation and the overthrow of privilege’. The Parliamentary government was to be eliminated and replaced by the Commune form of government, with its ‘suppression of the standing army, and the substitution of the armed people.’ Marx eulogises the

Commune because it ‘got rid of the standing army and police.’ These neo-Marxians are going ‘to use the machinery of government, including the armed forces of the nation’ (the capitalist government and the standing army and the police) as the ‘agent of emancipation.’ ”

If “Marx and Engels wherever they wrote in relation to the State, took pains to point out that this is just” what “the working class cannot do”, it is surely strange that Keracher cannot produce a single quotation to support his view!

Instead he drags out one or two phrases which in their context have nothing to do with the point. We have already quoted the first paragraph of *The Paris Commune*. The following three paragraphs are devoted to a brief history of the growth of state power in France to the time of the Commune. Then comes the paragraph from which Keracher has torn pieces and fitted them to suit his argument. The paragraph runs as follows:

“Paris, the central seat of the old governmental power, and, at the same time, the social stronghold of the French working-class, had risen in arms against the attempt of Thiers and the Rurals to restore and perpetuate that old governmental power bequeathed to them by the Empire. Paris could resist only because, in consequence of the siege, it had got rid of the army and replaced it by a National Guard, the bulk of which consisted of working-men. This fact was now transformed into an institution. The first decree of the Commune, therefore, was the suppression of the standing army, and the substitution for it of the armed people.”

It wasn’t a case of eliminating “parliamentary government”, but of resisting an attempt to restore an older form of government than the 3<sup>rd</sup> Empire. Also Marx was not referring to the general question of the suppression of the army, and his “eulogy” consisted of pointing out that as the army had been got rid of and was already replaced by armed workers, the first decree of the Commune very properly as a natural consequence was the “suppression of the standing army and the substitution for it of the armed people.” They took advantage of an accomplished fact.

In England and America, however, the army, etc., has not been got rid of, and the people are not armed. And in view of the powers of government through parliament, we would be interested to learn from him how he proposes getting rid of the army and arming the people.

This misapplied phrase of Marx, however, does not touch our position. Marx said, in effect, that you cannot carry on Socialism with capitalist governmental machinery; that you must transform the government of one class by another into the administration of social affairs; that between the capitalist society and Socialist society lies a period of transformation during which one after another the political forms of to-day will disappear, but the worst features must be lopped off immediately the working class obtains supremacy in the State. This completely harmonises with the position laid down in our Declaration of Principles.

Mr. Keracher's peculiar group gives no indication of the way they propose getting rid of the armed force now controlled by the capitalist and they hide their lameness in a cloud of phrases, like the following:

"The Proletarian Party continually labours to organise the workers as a class, to perform a political act, namely, the conquest of political power by the vast majority, and the organising of a State form, such as the Commune of Paris and the Soviet of Russia, with its proletarian dictatorship to coerce and expropriate all expropriators, and to ultimately develop a classless society of free people."

This means, in fact, the organising of another state within the capitalist state.

And we suppose that while all this is going on the capitalists and the force they control, "are just going to stand, hat in hand, and say, 'Welcome, brothers. It's all yours!'" "

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