

Parliament or Soviet: A reply to the “Proletarian” (U.S.A)

In our August number we pointed out that a certain John Keracher, of the American “Proletarian”, contributed an article to their July number which contained a covert attack on our principles and policy. That although our Declaration of Principles was quoted, our name had not been mentioned.

The October number of the “Proletarian” contains a reply to our criticism. Although Keracher had not thought it worth while mentioning our name in the previous article he now finds the matter so important that he devotes nearly *twelve columns* (nearly half of the paper) to us. And further, the matter was of such urgency that copies of the “Proletarian” were sent to the branches of our Party!

Throughout these twelve columns Keracher quotes portions of paragraphs of Marx and Engels in the effort to wring out of them an interpretation they will not bear. We pointed out in our criticism that quotations in the previous article had been made without the source being indicated. Keracher now tries to take refuge in the statement that we ought to know the source! The “Proletarian” is supposed to be a paper written for working men, and therefore, if working men are to test the truth of the evidence brought forward they must be able to go to the source for that purpose. But as the “Proletarian”, like other Communist organs, depends upon the ignorance of the workers, its writers are not over-anxious to give the workers the opportunity to see the frailty of the case put forward. As we cannot spare twelve columns to deal with Keracher, we will only take his leading points, and demonstrate his slipperiness, without following up all his by-paths.

At the end of our criticism of the “Proletarian” article we asked how they proposed getting rid of the armed force, at present controlled by the capitalists through Parliament, which stood in the way of any attempt to alter the foundations of society. This is the reply:

“Getting control of Parliament does not mean that the workers have gained control of the public power of coercion, the state. At such a critical moment the capitalist class (not so stupid as the S.P. of G.B.) will send its ‘armed forces’ to disperse Parliamentary representatives. The real State will show itself.”

For sheer stupidity the above takes the palm. How can the “capitalist class send its armed forces”? Are the capitalists sitting in a room somewhere, issuing orders?

The issuing of orders, the appointment and control of officials, and everything else connected with the operation of the armed forces, is in the hands of the group in Parliament that for the time constitutes the Government, i.e, has the majority. Time after time we have given abundant evidence of this fact in these columns.

The armed force is a part of the governmental machinery, the whole of which depends for its efficiency upon co-ordination. If the co-ordination breaks down the machinery becomes useless, or anarchy sets in. The co-ordination comes from the centre—Parliament.

After the above quotation comes the following paragraph:

“If ‘the armed forces of the nation’, most of it working men, remains loyal to the ruling class, then the proletariat will have to submit to a military dictatorship of the capitalists. If, on the other hand, the rank and file of the army and navy goes over to the working class, then the political power will have passed from the bourgeoisie to the proletariat. It is during this period that the new state form...will make its appearance. The Paris Commune and the Russian Soviet arose spontaneously out of the revolution itself.”

A couple of “ifs” are very weak material to base a course of action upon. Secondly, as the capitalists are alleged to be able to send their armed forces where they like, irrespective of the intentions of Parliament, surely the only inference to be drawn is that there is already a military dictatorship here and now. Thirdly, how is “the new State form” going to make its appearance; pop up suddenly like a mushroom over night? Fourthly, the Russian Soviet did not arise in 1917, but many years before. Fifthly, according to Trotsky, “It is true that the English Trades Unions may become a powerful lever for the revolution; they may even, in circumstances and for a certain time, be a substitute for the Workers’ Soviets.” (*The Lessons of October*, 1917, p.75.)

Sixthly, the Paris Commune was able to arise because the armed force of the French Government was “resting” in German prison camps.

In the cases of both the Communards and the Bolsheviks they were able to seize power because, owing to an unusually favourable set of circumstances, the armed force that would have stood in the way would have stood in the way had already been got rid of, or rendered innocuous by those who previously controlled State power. Are we asked to depend upon such a situation in the future instead of using the weapons we have at hand? Could stupidity go further?

Now let us give an example of Keracher’s slippery method of arguing. He says:

“ ‘The Communards proposed decentralisation,’ writes Gilmac approvingly.” There is nothing approving or disapproving in a statement of fact. But Keracher, unable to meet the point, takes refuge, like other wrigglers, in trying to foist upon his opponents views which they do not hold.

Mr. Keracher wants to have it both ways. To him the Paris Commune and the Russian Soviet Government are both “the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of labour.”

Let us give quotations from authorities upon each form.

Engels, in his introduction to the Paris commune, points out that the Blanquists in the Commune acted in a way exactly the opposite of their former attitude:

“The Blanquists fared no better. Brought up in the School of Conspiracy, held together by the rigid discipline essential to it, they started from the conception that a comparatively small number of resolute, well-organised men would be able not only to grasp the helm of State at a favourable moment, but also

through the display of great energy and reckless daring, to hold it as long as required; that is, until they had succeeded in carrying the masses of the people into the revolutionary current, and ranging them around the small leading band. To accomplish this, what was necessary, above all else, was the most stringent dictatorial centralisation of all power in the hands of the new revolutionary government. And what did the Commune do—which in the majority consisted of these Blanquists? In all its proclamations to the French people in the Provinces, it called upon them for a free federation of all French communes with Paris, for a National Organisation, which for the first time was to be the real creation of the nation. The Army, the political police, the Bureaucracy, all those agencies of oppression in a centralised government, which Napoleon had created in 1789, and which since then every new government had gladly used and kept up as ready weapons against its enemies, were to be abolished everywhere as they had been abolished in Paris.”
(*The Paris Commune*, p.10, N.Y.L.N.Co)

The following quotations from Lenin and Zinovieff show the rigid centralisation of the Bolshevik Government, and the way a portion of the Russian Communist Party kept power to themselves:

“It proves that unqualified centralisation and the strictest discipline of the proletariat are among the principal conditions for the victory over the bourgeoisie.” (*Left Wing Communism*, N. Lenin, p.110.)

“If Bolshevism could successfully, and under the greatest difficulties, achieve in 1917-1920 the strictest centralisation and iron discipline, it was due simply to a series of historical peculiarities of Russia.” (*Left Wing Communism*, p.11)

“Our central Committee has decided to deprive certain categories of party members the right to vote at the Congress of the Party. Certainly it is unheard of to limit the right of voting within the party, but the entire party has approved this measure, which is to ensure the homogenous unity of the Communists.

So that, in fact, we have 500,000 members who manage the entire State machine from top to bottom.” (Report by Zinovieff to First Congress of 3rd International, March, 1919. *The Socialist*, 29th April, 1920.)

“One of our misfortunes was that we had to take over the old State apparatus.” (The New Economic Policy, by Lenin. *The Communist*, 16th Dec., 1922.)

Now, Mr. Keracher, which is “the political form at last discovered,” the Commune or the Soviet government? Attempted witticisms are no answer to *facts*.

Keracher quotes a statement from Engels’ *Origin of the Family*. But he only quotes a few lines from a paragraph, but in connection with a different matter. The part he quotes first and attempts to make considerable use of is as follows:

“Universal suffrage is the gauge of the maturity of the working class. It can and never will be anything else in the modern State. But that is sufficient. On

the day when the thermometer of universal suffrage reaches its boiling point among the labourers, they as well as the capitalists will know what to do.”

Keracher, at the end of his article, asks us what Engels meant by this. We will tell him in Engels' own words. First from another, and later writing of Engels, and then from the paragraph from which the above is torn, as well as from what is probably the most read of all Engels' writings, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*.

In 1895, the year of his death, and twenty-three years after the Paris Commune, Engels wrote an introduction to a reprint of Marx's *Class Struggles in France*. In his introduction Engels says:

“When Bismarck now found it necessary to introduce universal suffrage as the only means of interesting the masses of the people in his designs, our workers were not slow to make a serious use of the new opportunity, and they sent August Bebel to the first constituent Reichstag. From that day to this they have utilised the suffrage in a manner which has rewarded them a thousandfold, and been an example to the workers of all other lands. To quote the words concerning the suffrage in the French Marxist programme, ‘ils l’ont transformé, de moyen duperie qu’il a été jusqu’ici, en instrument d’émancipation—they have changed it from a means of deceit, such as it has been hitherto, into a means of emancipation... even if it did no more than allow us to gauge our own strength and that of our opponents, thus preserving us alike from undue faintheartedness and from overweening rashness—if that were all universal suffrage had done for us, it would have been amply worth while.

But it has done more than this. Electoral agitation supplied us with a method of unsurpassed value for getting into contact with those strata of the populace which still held aloof from us, and for compelling the other parties to defend themselves publicly against the attacks we delivered upon their opinions and their actions. Moreover, in the Reichstag it provided our representatives with a platform from which to their opponents in Parliament and to the masses outside they could speak alike with far more authority and with greater freedom than had been possible in the Press and in public meetings. Of what use to the Government and to the bourgeoisie was their Socialist Law when electoral agitation and the speeches of Socialist deputies in the Reichstag were continually rendering its restrictions in the nugatory?

With the successful employment of universal suffrage an entirely new proletarian tactic had come into being, and this tactic speedily underwent further development. It was found that the governmental institutions in which the dominion of the bourgeoisie had secured organic expression provided a leverage whereby the proletariat could work for the overthrow of these very institutions. The workers participated in the elections to the diets; they voted in the municipal elections; they took their places in the arbitration courts; in their conflict with the bourgeoisie they disputed the possession of every post. The result of all this was that the bourgeoisie and the government grew far more afraid of the constitutional than the unconstitutional activities of the

working class party, and came to dread the results of an election far more than they dreaded the results of a rebellion.

The day of surprise attacks has passed, the day when small but resolute minorities could achieve revolutions by leading the masses to the onslaught. Where the question is one of a complete transformation in the social organism, the masses must wittingly participate, must fully understand what they are about. We have learned this from the history of the past 50 years. But if we are to enlighten the masses concerning the issue, prolonged and arduous toil will be requisite. This is the task on which we are now engaged, and with so much success that our adversaries are becoming desperately alarmed.

The irony of history turns everything topsy-turvy. We, the ‘revolutionists’, thrive better by the use of constitutional means than by unconstitutional and revolutionary methods. The parties of law and order, as they term themselves, are being destroyed by the constitutional implements which they themselves have fashioned.”

The paragraph in the *Origin of the Family*, from which Keracher quotes, is a long one, and starts on page 209 of Kerr’s edition. In the early part of it the following sentences occur:

“The highest form of the State, the democratic republic, knows officially nothing of property distinctions. It is the State, which under modern conditions of society, becomes more and more an unavoidable necessity. *The last decisive struggle between proletariat and bourgeoisie can only be fought out under this State form.*” (Italics ours.)

The paragraph then ends as follows:

“The possessing class rules directly through universal suffrage. For as long as the oppressed class—in this case the proletariat—is not ripe for its emancipation, just so long will its majority regard the existing form of society as the only one possible, and form the tail, the extreme left wing, of the capitalist class. *But the more the proletariat matures towards its self-emancipation, the more does it constitute itself as a separate class and elect its own representatives in place of the capitalists.* Universal suffrage is the gauge of the maturity of the working class. It can and never will be that in the modern State. But that is sufficient. On the day when the thermometer of universal suffrage reaches its boiling point among the labourers, they as well as the capitalists will know what to do.” (Italics ours.)

On the day when the thermometer reaches its boiling point the workers will have elected a majority of delegates to Parliament. That is Engels’ answer to the question. For further evidence let us turn to Engels’ *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, pp.74-77. (Sonneschien, 1892).

“Whilst the capitalist mode of production more and more completely transforms the great majority of the population into proletarians, it creates the power which, under penalty of its own destruction, is forced to accomplish this

revolution. Whilst it forces on more and more the transformation of the vast means of production, already socialised, into State property, it shows itself the way to accomplishing this revolution. *The proletariat seizes political power and turns the means of production into State property.*

But, in doing this, it abolishes itself as proletariat, abolishes also the State as State. Society thus far, based upon class antagonisms, had need of the State. That is, of an organisation of the particular class which was *pro tempore* the exploiting class, an organisation for the purpose of preventing any interference from without with the existing conditions of production and, therefore especially for the purpose of forcibly keeping the exploited class in the condition of oppression corresponding with the given mode of production (slavery, serfdom, wage-labour). The State was the official representative of society as a whole; the gathering of it together into a visible embodiment. But it was this only in so far as it was the State of that class which itself represented, for the time being, society as a whole; in the middle ages, the feudal lords; in our own time, the bourgeoisie. When at last it becomes the real representative of the whole of society, it renders itself unnecessary. As soon as there is no longer any social class to be held in subjection; as soon as the class rule, and the individual struggle for existence based upon our present anarchy in production, with the collisions and excesses arising from these, are removed, nothing more remains to be repressed, and a special repressive force, a State, is no longer necessary. The first act by virtue of which the State really constitutes itself the representative of the whole of society—the taking possession of the means of production in the name of society—this is at the same time, its last independent act as a State. State interference in social relations becomes, in one domain after another, superfluous, and then it dies out of itself; the government of persons is replaced by the administration of things, and by the conduct of the processes of production. The state is not ‘abolished’. *It dies out.*” (pp.74-77.)

“ III. Proletarian Revolution. – Solution of the contradictions. The proletariat seizes the public power, and by the means of this transforms the socialised means of production, slipping from the hands of the bourgeoisie, into public property. By this act the proletariat frees the means of production from the character of capital they have thus borne, and gives their socialised character complete freedom to work itself out. Socialised production on a pre-determined plan becomes henceforth possible. The development of production makes the existence of different classes of society thenceforth an anachronism. In proportion as anarchy in social production vanishes, the political authority of the State dies out. Man, at last the master of his own form of social organisation, becomes at the same time the lord over nature, his own master—free. (p.86.)

Note the commencement of the last paragraph: “The proletariat seizes the public power, *and by means of this* transforms the socialised means of production...into public property,” and take along with it the following, from the end of Engels’ 1891 introduction to *The Paris Commune* (New York Lab. News. Co.):

“But in reality the State is nothing else than a machine for the oppression of one class by another, and that no less so in the democratic republic than the monarchy. At the very best it is an inheritance of evil, bound to be transmitted to the proletariat when it has become victorious in its struggle for class supremacy, and the worst features of which it will have to lop off at once, as the Commune did, until a new race, grown up under new, free social conditions, will be in a position to shake off from itself the State rubbish in its entirety.”

The above quotations prove the correctness, according to Engels, of paragraph 6 of our Declaration of Principles, to which Mr. Keracher takes exception, and also the correctness of the summary of the Marxian view, given in our August number, to which Mr. Keracher also takes exception, i.e., 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 capitalist society and Socialist society lies a period of transformation during which one after another of 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.

In the last column Mr. Keracher, speaking of ourselves, says:

“They have not yet discovered how the workers of Paris and Russia got ‘rid of the armed forces controlled by the capitalists.’ ”

The answer is that neither Communists nor Bolsheviks got rid of the armed forces of the capitalists. In each case the capitalists, owing to the exigencies of war, did it.

Marx’s view of universal suffrage was clearly given in his article on the Chartists, in which he said:

“But universal suffrage is the equivalent for political power for the working class of England, where the proletariat forms the majority of the population, where, in a long, though underground civil war, it has gained a clear consciousness of itself as a class, and where even the rural districts know no longer any peasants, but landlords, industrial capitalists (farmers) and hired labourers. The carrying of universal suffrage in England, would, therefore, be a far more Socialistic measure than anything which has been honoured with that name on the Continent.

Its inevitable result here, is the political supremacy of the working class.”
(‘N.Y. Tribune,’ 25th Aug. 1852; quoted by ‘Labour Monthly,’ Dec., 1929.)

Keracher, like the rest of the pro-Bolsheviks, tries to foist upon Marx and Engels their own views of “Dictatorship of the Proletariat.” As was pointed out in the May number of the “S.S.,” in all the voluminous writings of Marx and Engels they only use the expression *three* times. Marx twice; once in a *private* letter criticising the “free people’s state” (*The Gotha Program*), and once in the *Class Struggle in France*, where, dealing with the large peasantry and small working class in France, he said that if the workers got power there would be a “Dictatorship of the Proletariat.” Engels used it only once, at the end of the *Paris Commune*, where he advised opponents to look at the Paris Commune, that was the dictatorship of the proletariat.

And these three references (one of which was not intended for public consumption) are the basis of all the post-war talk of “Dictatorship”!

We have no further space to spare for Mr. Keracher’s other twists and turns. The above, however, will give a fair idea of the shifts he is compelled to resort to. In the whole of twelve columns he failed to show how the working class could obtain control of the armed forces, by ignoring parliament, and what force, and how, the Proletarian Party would meet the political power of the capitalists. We are evidently supposed to guess this!

(December 1930)