

Parliament or Soviet? A critical examination

The self-styled left wing of the so-called Socialist and Labour movement of Great Britain has for some time past been debating the topic of the Soviet is opposed to Parliament as the means of securing the “dictatorship of the proletariat.”

Just as the right wing of the reformist Labour Party has condemned the Soviet as an anti-socialist institution, so the left wing Anarchists (for in practice that is what they are) have gone to the other extreme and proclaimed the Soviet as the *only* means of realising Socialism! What has the Socialist Party of Great Britain to say on the matter? The answer is implicit in its declaration of principles.

“The working class must organise consciously and politically for the conquest of the powers of government.”

In the *Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels clearly stated that the form of application of Communist principles would vary according to the degree of development, industrial and political, reached in the various countries. It is equally absurd, therefore, to condemn or uphold the Soviet system irrespective of the conditions out of which it arose.

In Russia the Soviets arose spontaneously in opposition to the Tsarist (and later the Bourgeois) dictatorship. Parliament had never been the supreme power in the State because the bulk of the population had never been industrially concentrated and politically organised. Local councils acting independently to a large extent, and at most never realising the need for more than federal unity, were, therefore, the natural expression of popular opinion. In adopting the Soviet constitution, the Bolsheviks did not invent a system: they accepted a fact! Their attempt to convoke a central assembly representative of the mass of the people had failed, as it was bound to fail, in a welter of illiteracy and disorganisation. The point is often missed that it was not only the Bolshevik Party which was in a minority. The whole of the political parties in the Assembly put together were!

Had that not been the case it is difficult to understand the ease with which the Assembly was suppressed. Contrast this state of affairs with that obtaining in the western “democracies.” For generations the working class has been in the habit of supporting capitalist parties, and for a still longer period these parties have been controlling, through Parliament, the machinery of Government. Soviets simply do not exist except in the fevered imaginations of the “left-wingers.” Some of the latter indeed appear to regard the Trades Councils, etc., as incipient Soviets, but the value of these bodies for the purpose of establishing Socialism is, to say the least, obscure, and the more “advanced” Sovietites are opposed to anything short of industrial unions with a programme of “equal wages.” But the central factor of the political situation, i.e., the armed force of society, is not controlled by either trades council or industrial union. It is controlled by Parliament. Parliament represents the powers of government, and not till it ceases to do so will the necessity for capturing it disappear. This much is obvious.

The Sovietites, of course, trust to a revolt of the army against Parliament; but such a revolt would be unnecessary if revolutionists were a majority therein, and it would be futile (and in the highest degree unlikely) if they were not. The army cannot establish Socialism. That must be done by the mass of society, the working class, who possess the majority of the votes for the public bodies, national and local, and can therefore convert those bodies into revolutionary agencies whenever they choose to do so. Before the army can come over to the workers it must have something to come over to! Some sort of alternative to the existing social order must be immediately practicable. In other words the workers must be consciously and politically organised for Socialism. This requires incessant propagandist effort of an educational character. Not mere inflammatory sentiments but illuminating science is necessary.

But this is not what the Sovietites supply. One surveys the field of their practical activities only to perceive a desperate state of confusion. Thus the B.S.P., alleging its adherence to the “third international,” remains part of the Labour Party, which belongs to the second! Declaring for Soviets, it nevertheless continues Parliamentary methods, presumably for self-advertisement sake and to provide scope for its adventurers.

The S.L.P. attacks the B.S.P. theoretically for inconsistency, but in practice never tires of trying to come to a working arrangement with it. Likewise the W.S.F which pretends to oppose any form of

parliamentary action as anti-Socialist. Opportunists all, they cannot do without their immediate demands, to be realised indiscriminately by legislation or the general strike, they are never clear or united as to which. Swearing by the Revolution, they cannot trust it as the all-sufficient and supreme programme. Like the avowed reformers they denounce, they must be “practical”; must always “talk down” to ignorance. Exactitude they deplore as “pedantry”; consistency they regard as “inadaptability.” The Socialist Party, however, is prepared to go on with its work knowing that events will prove its attitude to be the correct one.

Capitalism may develop, but its basis and essential character remain the same. The principles, therefore, which are deduced from that basis and serve as a guide to working-class action remain unchanged. As for the application of those principles, in the words of Marx: “The more *highly* developed country holds up to the *less* developed the mirror of its own future.” It is not, therefore, a question of following Russia, but it will be a question of Russia having to follow us. The S.P.G.B never had to leave the Second International: it was never in it! Representing working-class interests, it is hostile to every other party. Only on such lines can Socialism be realised.

All power to the workers—through the Socialist Party!

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