Leaving the swamp - L'Ouvrier Communiste

An article published in August, 1929 in L'Ouvrier Communiste (the Communist Worker) issue no. 1, which was the journal of the Communist Workers’ Groups, who were led ideologically by Michelangelo Pappalardi. This group split from Prometeo on several key questions, immediately pursuing a rapprochement with the line of the old KAPD (Communist Workers’ Party of Germany). This article outlines their disagreements with the Bordigist tradition and with Leninism, more generally.

The great struggles and defeats of the working class in the war and post-war periods have created the basis for a new rebirth of the proletarian forces, for a resurgence of ideological consciousness and the proletariat’s capacity to fight. Only this elevation of the proletarian ideology occurs at the expense of a process of decomposition of the organizations in which the working class could not find the weapons for its victory over capitalism, organizations represented by social democracy and Bolshevism.

Our origin as a group where the weapon of revolutionary criticism fears neither leaders nor idols is due to this process of decomposition, which spread rapidly within the Comintern soon after the NEP. But our development, our freedom from the mud of the swamp, was not the work of a day. It took much fighting to reach our current ideological level. And if our position today is free of opportunism that is due to a double split.

On the revolutionary terrain we can achieve clarity only at that price; there is no other possible way to retain and circulate the positions we have won with so much effort. A few must stay, sometimes a handful must stay alone. Otherwise there is nothing to do but to hide these positions under a bushel of compromise and mechanical discipline.

The first split freed us from disciplinary bigotry, where those pitiful centrists, the Comintern reformists, still floundered. But this first split, that we owe to the elements of Prometeo and which allowed us to see the wider horizon, was not enough.

There were hesitants among us heretics that were frightened by our iconoclastic tendency and who hid in their pockets faded images in the hope that one day they might be the source of a miracle. There were also those who went adrift in a current of labor aristocracy, permanently separated from the revolution. Of all those we got rid of, we have no regrets because our ideas and revolutionary positions were worth more than their recalcitrant company.

Moreover, the perfect ideological homogeneity that can be achieved in a period of decomposition at the expense of quantity is much preferable to a larger combination of heterogeneous elements. Today, the growth of quality is affected by a decrease in quantity. People, who in the presence of this harsh reality
cling to the myth of unity to defend their false positions, did not understand the need for this process. Frightened of the current isolation, they drift with the current, having forgotten that historical reality is not limited at present, but is a complicated set of contingencies which ultimately eliminates such negligible elements.

But what does their loss matter next to our ideological deliverance! Do we not rejoice for severing a bond that would perhaps have returned us to the swamps?

We began our development through the negation of the formal myth of unity, because we knew well that this is a means of preserving counter-revolutionary organizations. History, the facts before us, demonstrated the accuracy of this truth. We merely did that which we took notice of, alas! A bit late.

Was it too late? No. Besides, how else could this discovery have been made? The elements of subjective consciousness (these are Lenin's expressions) are not an acceleration of history. We cannot build on sand. The subjective is only the reflection of the continuation, even an aspect, of the objective itself. It is historical experience that develops new ideological positions, which creates the new forms of struggle at the expense of the old and antiquated organizations.

Lenin's great error, which was unknowingly in him; the reflection of a situation where the proletarian element wasn't the only one to play a significant role, was precisely this tendency to artificial constructions, to the strategy which, wishing to advance the boundaries of reality by a predetermined plan, ends up truncating the sprouts of spontaneity.

Bordiga's letter to Korsch published by Prometeo commented on this failing of Lenin. What he failed to note is that the blame falls upon all those who followed Lenin in the experience of the Comintern, including Bordiga and ourselves. This lack of objectivity leads to forgetting the merit of those who did not follow Lenin in his attempt. And liability increases if elements like Bordiga and many others, knowing that the Leninist line would lead to the bankruptcy of the Third International, had not said so with sufficient clarity.

Today it is painful to note that the representatives of Bordiga's line pretend to consider this line as an original and specific trend of the Left within the International, while it is rather a belated branch of the true Marxist left, the one in 1919 and 1920, whose representatives were Pankhurst in Britain and the Tribunists Gorter and Pannekoek in Holland.

Il Soviet, the organ of the abstentionist faction in the Italian Socialist Party, has even published a booklet by Pannekoek! That which finally found expression in Germany in the Communist Workers' Party, against which are directed almost all the attacks in Lenin's Infantile Disease.

There is no hiding it, only the Tribunists and German radicals refused to follow the Lenin's line. It was Herman Gorter in his open letter to Lenin, written for him and the German Communist Party, who denounced Lenin's false line.

Already the 'old mole' has executed his judgment. Gorter was right and Lenin wrong. The Leninist line has led to the worst defeats, the constitution of mass parties has formed a new opportunistic and counter-revolutionary bulwark in the camp of the proletariat. The world revolution found saboteurs in these parties, not guides.

Lenin's line was that of unity, Gorter's line that of the split. But what was the result of the tactic of unity? Defeat and then decay.

Today, given what we've experienced, it is no longer a question of saving the Comintern by desperately clinging to Leninism, as most of the opposition does, it is to condemn, in the light of historical experience,
that same Leninism. And by that we mean the tactical opportunism, which cannot artificially create unity, but delays the spontaneous process of revolutionary unification. At the same time, we must turn to the left line, to the ‘infantile radicalism’, which Lenin had already condemned in 1920.

This may seem like a paradox, but the ‘old mole’ was responsible for proving that it was not radicalism that was the infantile disease of communism. It was rather Leninism. The relation of the social forces in Russia, which were far less developed than in Western Europe and America, formed the basis of Leninist infantilism. Thus Lenin and the Leninists thought they could apply the same strategy in Russia and in other countries, which no longer had a bourgeois revolution to carry out. Leninism, which has failed to draw from the Western experience the elements of maturation, has been transformed into despotism and reaction both in Russia and on the international scene. And so it was that the proletariat has seen the number of its enemies grow. The proletariat is no longer dealing only with bourgeois democracy and social democracy, it is also dealing with that counterfeit of communism which is Bolshevism.

The fundamental aspect of the Leninist infantile disease was compromise. Compromise was thus applied in the formation of the parties of the Third International. In 1919 and 1920 the extremists or ultraleft elements all tended to total anti-parliamentarism; Leninism engaged in a struggle against these elements, which either let themselves be bent or were driven out of the ranks of official Communism. Radical anti-parliamentarism was a general expression of the extent of consciousness attained by the proletariat through the experience of war in the advanced capitalist countries. There was no confusing, as Lenin did, this manifestation of the revolutionary development within the most advanced countries with Russian Otzovism. But that mode of comparison is one of the (not always dialectical) methods of the Leninist ideology. They accepted parliamentary demagogues into the International, who swarmed in the Independent Socialist Party, in the left wing of the Socialist Party in France, in the Socialist Party in Italy. It was thus that 'leaders' were given to the masses of the Comintern.

On the one hand, extremism was fought and chased, on the other, parliamentary opportunism was allowed to take root in the ranks of the proletarian vanguard. Thus, the anti-parliamentarism of the extremists – justified historically by the conflict between the parliament, the political organ of capitalism, and the councils, the political organs of the proletariat – was condemned by Leninism and had no place in the Comintern.

It is clear that the first step of Bolshevism towards compromise was to separate itself from the best revolutionary elements and hence from the actual revolutionary reality. In light of historical experience, we can say today that the parliamentary question was not a secondary one, as it showed in the different interpretation of communist tactics the fundamental difference between the Russian revolution and the Western Revolution. Today the Leninist strategy has failed and led the Comintern to join the ranks of the counter-revolution. It is clear that had the Third International had in its ideological base the strength of radical anti-parliamentarism, this scarecrow of opportunists, the process of degeneration of the Third International would not have been as easy and that this body would have at least retained the revolutionary positions of the international proletariat.

It was not, however, enough to compromise on the question of mass parties and parliamentarianism. After the introduction of the NEP, the compromise with international social democracy was in the theory and practice of the united front. It was tried by a diplomatic formulation to hide the true opportunistic meaning of this tactic, which reflected the initial degeneration of the proletarian dictatorship in Russia on the international scene.

Miasnikov in a 1922 polemic with Lenin rightly remarked that they had tried in vain to hide the clearly social democratic nature of this tactic under new formulas (rope and hanging, etc.). This tactic which was applied simultaneously with the launch of the slogan of the workers and peasants’ government (a slogan
devoid of meaning in the advanced capitalist countries) revealed in a few years the opportunistic nature of the new International. Within a short span of time, it led the Comintern to the very positions that caused Social Democracy to collapse in 1914.

In 1923, the German Communist Party under the leadership of the Moscow Executive not only applied the tactic of the united front with social democracy, it tried to apply it even with the fascist elements within Germany. Towards this end, it extolled the Nation and maintained at the same time that only the proletariat affiliated with all the wholesome elements within the populace could defend and save the motherland from danger. This was an open betrayal of internationalist principles.

There are those who want to pass off the betrayal of 1923 in Germany as a simple mistake. These are, in fact, the same people who now want to save the Comintern. But let us not forget Radek’s speech on Schlageter, the speeches of Bukharin and Zetkin on the Comintern position vis-à-vis Germany in 1923, and let us not ignore that collaboration between the Red Army and the Reichswehr was considered at that time. Nobody within the revolutionary ranks should omit what they never managed to refute: in 1922 and 23, Soviet Russia armed the Reichswehr, against whom the proletariat was fighting heroically.

The application of compromise pushed to treason finds its theoretical basis in the Infantile Disease of Lenin and even in Against the Current by Lenin and Zinoviev. It has been said: Lenin would not have gone so far. But when we make the critique of Leninism we cannot consider this argument. What matters is that Leninism has already done so. In Against the Current Lenin takes contradictory positions on the national question. His reasoning oscillates between a very reasonable internationalist position and the preservation of false tactics (he will look for ‘revolutionary forces’, historically dead in nationalist struggles, in the autonomy of peoples, etc.), offering a broad theoretical basis for the treason of 1923. Thalheimer, the twin soul of Brandler (of whom Souvarine was an apostle in France), was well served by the equivocal position of Lenin to justify, in an article published in Die Rote Fahne in 1923, the National Bolshevism of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD).

Here again the nature of Leninist ideology is revealed as compromising, in the old social-democratic style, in contrast with the ideology of the Marxist left.

This is precisely what Rosa Luxemburg, who together with the Dutch and Polish left showed the objective tendencies of revolution in the West, was able to discern in the Leninist deviations of Against the Current as the first manifestations of the National Bolshevism of 1923.

The hasty compromise that created the Third International in a moment of enthusiasm, hid these differences, the importance of which became clear later, under a bushel. And it is with a sense of admiration that one reads the criticisms that Rosa Luxemburg made of the Bolshevik Revolution and its false national strategy, a critique which was sketched just before the death of this great Marxist theoretician. The enthusiasm and then complicity which had silenced the pleiad of leaders of the Comintern had not in the least disturbed the objectivity of the proletarian heroine; fortunately for her, she found neither apologists nor worshipers in the Leninist-Bukharinist school.

Once again, the Leninist compromise suffered another defeat and again it must be condemned. Yet the deeper lesson imposed upon Leninism by the facts remains the failure of the conquest of the unions. On this ground Bordigism, Brandlérism, every nuance, and every trend in the Third International followed the same line. And it is for this purpose that all supported the need to stay in the same reformist unions to fight reformism and to replace the reformist leaders with communist leaders in order to revolutionize the unions. Until yesterday we were the ‘conquerors’, we believed in the utopia of the union conquest. We had to think carefully, witness the triumph of arbitration, we had to scour the German, Italian, and Russian experiences to see that Leninism was infantile even there. Lenin had forgotten, as a bad dialectician, that the forms of the class struggle are not always the same, that the originally natural organs
may be distorted and become outmoded and reactionary. Today the ‘conquerors’ are stranded on the reef of compulsory arbitration. What bitter fruit that error has borne for the proletariat.

The historical conflict between the factory councils and trade unions was hidden beneath the bushel of the theory of conquest, between revolution and the counter-revolution. The minds of the workers have been swayed by the illusion that by replacing men with men, officials with officials, it was possible to revolutionize organs which history had condemned during the war and during the revolutionary upsurge. Leninism, which contrary to reformism justly supported the need to smash the state, did not understand that the unions, which had become integrated with the state, were also to be smashed. In Germany, attempts have been made to conquer, and they have allowed themselves to be conquered; in Russia the trade unions are, as in Italy, corporations; they form the vice which grips the working class in its jaws.

And trade union bodies, which, apart from the Amsterdam International, claim to retain the tradition of class struggle, are inevitably pushed in the same direction as the yellow organizations. Their reformist nature prevails and already even outweighs their revolutionary phraseology. On the one hand, there is the anti-proletarian influence of the Russian state, which makes them the plaything of counter-revolutionary politics, on the other hand, their essence, which constrains them within the narrow limits of partial demands, developing in them organs of labor discipline, makes them obstacles to the development of the revolutionary consciousness of the proletariat. For these reasons we refuse to see in them any longer revolutionary forms of the class struggle. As for organizations outside the International Section of Amsterdam and the Red International of Labor Unions, seeking the solution to the class struggle on the same terrain, that is to say, in the same form in which others have already revealed or are in the process of revealing their impotence, they are destined to meet the same fate. Whether in Germany, where they chose to split, or in France, where they cling to the theory of the conquest (just take a look at the action and theory the Syndicalist League to see that it is already in the rut of class collaborationism), they only demonstrate this reality more fully.

We cannot conquer the unions for the revolution, we cannot create revolutionary unions. The contradiction between the fight for bread and the struggle for the revolution was resolved historically in the factory councils, the revolutionary councils which will smash the apparatus of the bourgeois state and with it the unions themselves.

In our consideration, we have not fully developed our criticism. We have had to content ourselves with sketching only the critical side of our thinking. To give a solid foundation to our criticism there must be a thorough analysis of the development of the class struggle in the post-war years. What is certain is that the elements of this analysis, which we will try to develop in our subsequent activity, exist. We can therefore now draw general conclusions. These findings do not simply lead us to condemn Leninism as an ideology and practice. They lead us to positions which must be consolidated, but which, given the objective basis of the proletarian struggle on the international scene, are of lasting value. They do not relate to pure contingency, but to the entire period of preparation and development of the proletarian revolution.

There must also be a diffusion among proletarians of the content of these positions and not by the methods of Bolshevik agitation, but by Communist propaganda, which has no immediate goals, but one goal: the proletarian revolution.

To prepare from a very limited base, from a conscious elite, the spirit of the working mass to revolution, or, to be more precise, the historical experience from which the proletariat receives most of its education, its consciousness of its mission to rebel and to carry out the economic and social transformation: this is our fundamental position.
One cannot maintain this position by a strategy of leaders. On the contrary, it can be consolidated only by condemning the politics of leaders (it should be noted that we cannot call leaders the representatives of the proletarian class who are controlled before and during the revolutionary action, nor the members of the councils and other revolutionary bodies, which are mere instruments of proletarian action, which have found and still find their refuge in organizations where the basic mass has no consciousness of revolutionary problems. That is why we are in no hurry to found a new party, to hastily expand our organizational base. We do not want to repeat these mistakes; we do not want with us those who have not yet understood us. By adopting this method, we will be safeguarded against the restoration of political leaders in our ranks. We aim to form a truly revolutionary party and it is for this purpose that we prefer to remain still, for a long time if necessary, a sect.

And again to maintain this position, to preserve its bulwark in the revolution, it will not be enough to develop a proletarian consciousness through propaganda, nor to separate ourselves from the politics of leaders. To tear this position away from the age-old influence of culture, from the bourgeois milieu, there must be a definite break with all bourgeois tradition. It will be necessary to enter into an open struggle against forms which tend to preserve and spread the roots of bourgeois influence among the working class. It is necessary to break with parliamentarians and trade unionists; it is necessary to prepare their destruction. It is necessary to incite the working class to boycott parliament and prepare its destruction. It is necessary to tell the proletariat that the struggle for partial demands cannot result in the amelioration of working class living conditions, that it has value only as an element in preparation for the revolutionary struggle, which will lead us to the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat; that unions cannot be the expression of this revolutionary struggle, that they lead to class collaboration, that is to say, to greater slavery of the working class.

It goes without saying that the experience and proliferation of this truth has enormous and fundamental value for the development of proletarian consciousness. But when our propaganda instead of supporting this truth, instead of supporting the ‘lessons of history’, runs contrary to historical reality, our activity becomes counter-revolutionary; when Leninism denies the existence of a higher level of proletarian consciousness and tries to pass it off as an infantile disease, it conflicts with history, it becomes counter-revolutionary. We do not want the handful of heroes who by their actions awaken revolutions and create new social bases.

Merely by retaining the positions that the proletariat won during the post-war revolutionary period, even if it was at the cost of a thousand defeats, we fulfill our modest but necessary role.

And to maintain and expand these positions we will fight tirelessly against all enemies of the revolution, against the bourgeoisie and its affiliates, against Western social democracy and against the social democracy of Moscow.