

OUR MOVEMENT 60 YEARS AGO

growing with remarkable rapidity... To fear a 'compromise' with this wing of the party is positively ridiculous. On the contrary, it is obligatory for the Communists to seek and to find a suitable form of compromise with them, such a compromise as, on the one hand, would facilitate and accelerate the necessary complete fusion with this wing and, on the other, would in no way hamper the Communists in their ideological and political struggle against the opportunist Right wing of the 'Independents'..."

In the months following the Congress both the USPD and the SFIO split, and in 1922 the PSI as well. The great majority of the USPD and the SFIO came over to the Third International, though in Italy, partly because of the rigid ultra-leftism of the Communist nucleus led by Amadeo Bordiga, only a minority of the PSI came over to Communism.

The task of the Communist Parties was not just to combat the organisations openly loyal to the bourgeoisie, it was also their task to drive out all agents of the class enemy within the labour movement as well, which demanded a final and irrevocable break with the hardened reformists and opportunists of the USPD, SFIO, and PSI leaderships.

But when Lenin spoke to the wavering PSI leader, Serrati, his advice was: Split with Turati [the PSI's leading right-winger] — and then form an alliance with him.

The sixth of the 19 theses on the role of the Communist Party in the proletarian revolution adopted by the congress began: "The most important task of a truly Communist Party consists in always remaining in the closest contact with the broadest layers of the proletariat". Communists were not simply the guardians of some perfect programme; they had to fight for the programme in the working class, which involved fighting in the existing trade unions.

The most 'pure' ultra-leftists argued that it was wrong to fight for higher wages, since higher wages would reduce the militancy of the working class — but industrial sabotage was a valid method of struggle against the bosses.

Karl Radek, a militant prominent in both the German and Russian revolutionary movements, replied. The winning of wage increases was necessary to maintain the "fighting fitness" of the workers, and opposition to fighting for higher wages was based on the myth perpetuated by the Second International that capitalism would inevitably collapse of its own accord. Nor was industrial sabotage of any use: it was an individualistic method of struggle, whereas Communists fought to mobilise the masses, for "the extension of the fighting front by enlisting millions of fighting workers, the sharpening and prolonging of the fight and the unification of the fighting masses".

But the main source of opposition to Communists working in the existing trade unions came from some syndicalists present at the Congress. They believed it to be impossible to do any useful work in such unions. New, pure, revolutionary

trade unions were needed.

"It is simply nonsense and ridiculous to talk of conquering the old trade unions with their ossified bureaucracy", argued the British delegate Willie Gallacher, for, despite working in the unions for 25 years, "we have never succeeded in revolutionising them from the inside. Every time we succeeded in making one of our own comrades an official of the trade unions... the trade unions corrupted our own comrades".

Gallacher went on to deny that the unions were a road to the masses: "in a trade union with 500 members, there are normally only 30 members at the trade union meeting, and the latter is under the control of the bureaucracy". Gallacher's pessimistic conclusion was that "it is as nonsensical to talk of winning the trade unions as it is to talk of winning the capitalist state".

The starting point for the arguments of Gallacher and the other delegates at the

overthrow capitalism! The argument for breakaway union was in fact a totally pessimistic one which, if correct, would have meant that the socialist revolution was impossible: if the rank and file of the unions could not be mobilised to defeat their own bureaucracy, they could never be mobilised to smash capitalism.

In two cases the Congress did sanction the formation of new unions. If the regime in the existing union was so totalitarian that it was absolutely impossible to carry out revolutionary agitation in them. And if an existing union, because of its craft-chauvinistic outlook, failed to organise unskilled workers, as was the case with the American Federation of Labour.

But apart from these exceptions it was the job of Communists to fight in the existing union. The logic behind this position was the logic which dominated the whole of the Congress: Marxism was not a set of formulae, but a guide to action.



Congress who shared his position was a healthy gut reaction against the conservative craft chauvinism which dominated many European and (even more) American unions, and the class collaborationist role played by the trade unions during the war. But the conclusion they drew was a suicidal one.

For revolutionaries to withdraw from the existing unions would have been an act of voluntary self-isolation from the millions organised in the unions and would have played right into the hands of the union bureaucracy. It would mean that the bureaucrats, freed of any opposition within the union, would have a free hand in keeping down the rank and file and selling out their interests at every opportunity.

"We have not one, but a hundred, proofs of the fact that the trade union bureaucracy will festively greet the day that the Communists leave their ranks... Our comrades know that would be just like uncoupling the locomotive from a train and driving around with it, but leaving the train itself to its fate", declared the German Communist Jacob Walcher.

In fact the argument for breakaway unions was based on a single, massive contradiction. On the one hand the syndicalists argued that the masses were straining at the leash and that revolution was imminent; on the other hand they claimed that the bureaucracy in the unions could not be overthrown by the membership.

But the union membership which was too weak to overthrow the bureaucracy was at the same time strong enough to

Communists had to go where the masses were and fight for their politics there, rather than isolate themselves and preach from the sidelines.

The debate around the issue of whether revolutionaries should participate in bourgeois parliaments was in many ways a parallel to the trade union debate. The two sides in the two debates were roughly the same, and one side was again guided by superstitious fears of what might happen to revolutionaries in parliament, whilst the other based itself on the idea that there was no corner of society into which Communists did not carry the class struggle.

Gallacher and others believed that the Third International was on the road to becoming opportunist by advocating work in Parliament, for "one cannot demand agitation from those who enter Parliament. The Communist Parties all over the world now have something other to do than wasting time on parliamentary elections". As far as Gallacher was concerned therefore, anyone entering parliament would automatically become a traitor and a reformist in the 'best' traditions of the Second International.

With some very important exceptions, the parliamentarians of the Second International did sell out the workers — but there was nothing automatic or inevitable about it. It had been the result of the weaknesses of the individuals and, more importantly, of the organisations to which they belonged. A thoroughly revolutionary organisation of hardened Bolsheviks need have no qualms about its members