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# Is the “Left Wing” Right?

A Letter to the Editor of *The New York Call*, March 4, 1919.

by Cameron King

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Editor of *The Call*:

There has recently appeared a “Manifesto and Program of the Left Wing of the American Socialist Movement,” which declares “there is a fundamental distinction in views concerning party policies and tactics. And we believe this difference is so vast that from our standpoint a radical change in party policies and tactics is necessary.”

Further on they state that “the vital difference between revolutionary socialism (which they assume exclusively to represent) and moderate socialism (by which they mean the rest of the Socialists) lies in the varying conceptions of political action.” And their revolutionary socialism holds that “the capture of the political state is merely for the purpose of destroying it.” “The political arm of labor cannot be used as a means of taking away from the capitalists and holding for the workers the means of production. Only the economic organization of the working class can build the new society within the frame of the old.”

Specifically, the “left wing” demands “the abolition of social reform planks now contained in party platforms,” and that “the party must teach, propagate, and agitate exclusively for the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of Socialism through a proletarian dictatorship.” This program would prohibit all agitation for amnesty for the prisoners of the class war; for measures for the relief of unemployment; for restitution of free speech and press; for reform of the judiciary or other branches of government; for anti-militarism,

or for anything except “the revolution.”

The conception here given is that the political state government cannot be used to help the workers in any constructive way. The only reason for the Socialist Party seeking to secure political power is to prevent that state power being used to help the capitalists. Political power is to be used by the Socialists solely to prevent capitalistic power being mobilized against the economic organizations of labor, while by direct action, by strikes and outright physical force they take control of industry, ousting the capitalists from possession and appropriating the entire product for the workers.

It seems very simple, and would be very simple if the social revolution were a simple act in a simple society, instead of a prolonged process in a highly complex society. But, unfortunately, the social revolution is unlikely to be a single act. And there is a long, hard series of battles ahead of us before the social revolution can be achieved — and after. In the struggle between the working class and the capitalist class, all means will be used that can be used. And, despite doctrinaire dictum, they will be used as far as it is possible or profitable to use them.

I challenge the “left wing” doctrine that political action is, or should be, only destructive in nature. I affirm positively that not merely in that period of agitation and organization prior to the capture of national political power by the working class, but that subsequent thereto, in the building of the Socialist state, political action can and

must render not only valuable, but indispensable services to the working class.

It will probably be agreed by the "left wing" that Socialist political success in the United States will occur first in cities. Next it will probably come in those states of the union which are industrial in character. Unquestionably some states will come under Socialist control several years before others and long before the Socialists are able to command a majority in the House of Representatives in Washington. It is an evident political fact that only by keeping control in the cities captured can the state be won for the Socialist Party. Only by maintaining the political hold secured on the state can the nation be ultimately captured by the Socialist Party.

Now, I maintain that the truth and wisdom of the left wing position can be tested by the questions: Can it be applied in those cities and states that lead in coming under Socialist control? Does it apply even to the nation when the Socialists secure supreme power?

For instance, let us assume that in any city the Socialists and Citizens' Alliance are contesting for success in the municipal election. Suppose a street car franchise is about to expire. Are the Socialists to refuse to say that they will municipalize that car line? Or are they to proclaim their intention to have the line taken over by the city to shorten the hours of labor, to increase the wages of the employees and to provide for their representation in the management of the line? The latter is constructive political action by a city under capitalism still, but controlled by the workers. It is of manifest benefit to the workers on the street car lines. It is of advantage also to all the workers in the city. It is a denial of the left wing theory and tactics.

Other instances of municipal action might be cited, but this one is enough. Unless the Socialist Party took positive, constructive action, they would betray the interests of the workers and would very properly be thrown out at the next

election.

Let us advance to the state. Suppose a nationwide period of unemployment and the Socialists in control of a state government. Would Socialist political action to meet that unemployed situation be purely negative or destructive? Or would it begin to reduce the hours of labor by law, to provide employment on various governmental projects, such as reclamation of swamp and arid lands, with, possibly, colonization of agricultural workers on a cooperative basis, reforestation, improved housing, etc. This is a single instance, but it is an instance of constructive political action, of social reform work, if you please, but work which, if refused, would speedily result in the repudiation of the Socialist Party, because it refused to use its political power to help labor.

Now let us take the nation. Let us assume a working majority of both houses of Congress and the Presidency to be under Socialist control. Would President and Congress simply sit idle and say to the workers, "Seize the industries and organize them as you see fit?" Or would they consider it up to them to take an active part in organizing the Socialist state?

We do not have to speculate on this. The Left Wing has demanded an unequivocal endorsement of the Russian Soviet republic, and the action of that state under the control of the Bolsheviks affords us an answer. In the pamphlet *The Soviets at Work*, Lenin, the acknowledged leader of the Soviet republic, says on page 11: "Of decisive importance is the organization of strict and universal accounting and control of production and distribution." On page 20, he says, "It will take some time...before the masses comprehend that without thorough state accounting and control of production and distribution, the authority of the toilers and their freedom cannot last, and a return to the yoke of capitalism is inevitable."

It will be noted that it is the "state accounting and control" that Lenin demands, an accounting and control proceeding from the central na-

tional government. It is vital. Without it, a return to capitalism is inevitable. The test, then, of the Left Wing dictum that political action should be and can be only destructive will be found in the answer to the question "Could the President and Congress establish in the United States national accounting and control? And the answer is emphatically, Yes! The activities of the Census Bureau, the War Industries Board, the War Labor Board, the Food Administration, and others show conclusively that national agencies of accounting and control, so vital, as Lenin testifies, can be established by political action by the central national political authority, and, indeed, Lenin's evidence goes toward proving that it can be established only by such political action and by such authority.

One might go further and cite the nationalization of banking, of foreign trade, and other acts of the Council of Peoples' Commissars of Russia as political actions proceeding from the supreme national political authority. And these could, likewise, be enacted by Congress and the President.

Upon the point of the limitations of political action, then, we must absolutely reject the Left Wing doctrine. Not only does the historic position of all Socialist parties condemn it, but the practical experience of the Russian Socialist republic proves it false. Political action is not only necessary, but constructive political action is absolutely vital to the success of Socialism.

Cameron H. King.

*Edited by Tim Davenport.*

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