

Revolutionary Parliamentarism

United Workers Party
1935

Written by "WT" (Wendelin Thomas) in the October 1935 (volume 1, issue 12) edition of *International Council Correspondence*, the journal of the United Workers Party, of which Paul Mattick, Sr., was a leading member. Many typos and mis-capitalizations have been corrected.

Propaganda against parliamentarism among the working class was for a long while extremely difficult. The assumption that the worker too, or his confidant, must take part in the work of law-making, in order that the laws to be passed may have regard for the interests of the class, has grown into a nice, comfortable habit. And it is quite as well known as regrettable that no one more than the worker hangs on to old habits, conservatively and without insight – in fact, he clings to them even long after the bourgeoisie has thrown them back into the lumber-room. This holds of all phenomena of society, whether in the field of general culture, of custom and morality or of politics. This special field of politics – parliamentarism – naturally forms no exception; for here there asserts itself not only the lack of independent movement on the part of the working class, but a quite imposing array of forces by which, when the social milieu gives rise to such a movement, it is held up. Parliamentarism – that is, the doctrine that the economic laws of a society are controlled by oratorical battles – is of course not only a doctrine, a philosophy, but an eminently practical matter; practical, that is, for those who conduct these oratorical battles – the members of Parliament, Congress, or whatever the law-making institution may be called in different countries. For them, the Parliament is exactly the same thing that Heaven and God are for a parson. As soon as people refuse to believe in the existence of Heaven and God, the parson's existence also collapses. Heaven and God are thus questions involving the livelihood of a certain group of people; and just as everyone is interested in the maintenance of his existence, so also are the uniformed God-champions. Apply this example to parliamentarism, and we have the whole truth.

The circumstances, however, that something is "true" is by no means any assurance that this something will forthwith come into its own, without further ado. In the first place, this is prevented by the fact that on the side of the deceived and misled the general possibility of perception and hence the courage that goes with it is too slight, while on the other side science, whose task it should be to serve as a medium of perceptions, stands wholly in the service of class rule. The more the possibility of perception developed in our civilization and the story of heaven and God could be recognized as a fairy tale, the greater was the amount of "science" put forth in order to bring into question the fruits of this recognition.

The history of parliamentarism is, to be sure, younger and briefer than that of theology, but resembles in it all its features. And of course, in the last analysis, both – parliamentarism and theology – are children of the same mother; that is, children of the belief that someone or other – excepting ourselves – will free us from our present ills. Not at

once, naturally, but, according to theology, when we are dead; while parliamentarism offers us the prospect of some day–after–tomorrow here on earth. For all this we have nothing to do but vote for those who take the trouble to hold continually before our eyes the beauties of a posthumous paradise or of an earthly day–after–tomorrow, and to support them in a manner befitting their station – naturally, in so far as possible, with paying in advance.

Just as the clergy in the age of enlightenment had to resort to much more refined means for keeping their little sheep in the fold, so also in times of extreme economic distress and the impossibility of a compromise between the ruling and the suppressed class the champions of parliamentarism had to rack their brains for extremely subtle proofs, which they set down in theses. The establishment and propagation of these proofs fell to the historical lot of the Communist International, in its various sections.

The world stands in an epoch of advanced revolutions, a process from which the communist parties were born. Their mission is therewith given: they must embrace the revolution. Since, however, embracing the revolution and acting in accordance therewith does not guarantee a full bourgeois existence, the functionaries of the sections must look for an occupation which they can find time to carry on in addition to their party work and the exercise of which does not conflict with their revolutionary profession of faith. They become – in addition to the paltry editors and party secretaries – parliamentarians. Now even tho it may be true that the professional parliamentarians have enough time left over for performing their party work, still it is not such an easy matter to avoid conflicts arising from their revolutionary profession of faith and their parliamentary duties. In this extremity, none other than “science” had to spring to the rescue. It first of all gave birth to the most ridiculous world–monstrosity in the political thesaurus: “revolutionary parliamentarism.”

No great amount of philosophical knowledge is needed in order to understand what an unmerited protective covering was acquired by parliamentarism and what a calumny was perpetrated on the concept “revolution” by this combining into a single phrase of two concepts which in their essence are nothing short of mortal enemies. Naturally, the reason for the invention and exploitation of this word–monstrosity was not that the beneficiaries of the communist party movement would not have been content with plain parliamentarism or had actually assured themselves that the “revolutionary parliamentarism” would really lend force to the proletarian class movement. Rather, the invention was necessary for the reason that the counter–revolutionary character of parliamentarism, so far as concerned the class–conscious part of the working class, was regarded as an established fact, and therefore logically the parliamentarians were looked upon as counter–revolutionists. Now since one could not very well be a revolutionist and counter–revolutionist at the same time, – and because especially one did not **want** to be such, – parliamentarism, the counter–revolutionary institution, was given the predicate “revolutionary”. In other words, an attempt was made to juggle away the essence of a device with a well chosen qualifying word. And it can not be disputed: the attempt was successful.

How could such an attempt succeed? To give a complete answer to this question would be to unroll the whole problem of the labor movement from A to Z, in order to observe in all its parts the influence which has been exercised by the paid functionaries upon the organized and unorganized masses, and which has culminated unmistakably in the maintenance and consolidation of the bourgeois ideology. “Somebody or other will do it for us who of course is more clever than we are, and whom we are just too stupid to criticize; somebody who knows everything and can do everything”. Naturally, this somebody can also revolutionize the Parliament or Congress, the counter–revolution in actuality. This state of fact – that is the blind belief in the most impossible capacities of some

“great” man or other – is not so laughable as the mention of it appears; for it was nothing less than a state of fact, and as such had enormous, disastrous consequences for the working class.

It might, of course, be objected – and this has been done quite frequently, – that in itself it is quite a matter of indifference what a revolutionist does just on the side: whether he catches butterflies or belongs to a glee-club or casts a ballot into a box. And if a revolutionist has gone so far as to exercise the right to vote, why should he not also exercise that of being voted for? Superficially regarded, these objections appear quite logical. But they will not bear thorough examination. It will probably not be denied that the workers grow politically stale even when they engage, “just on the side”, in cultural and athletic clubs or other such organizations not expressly revolutionary in their tendencies. Well, such organizations can not even so much as be mentioned in the same breath with parliamentarism. The most that those organizations do to the worker is to take away his spare time, which he might employ to better advantage. Since their tendency is neither expressly revolutionary nor counter-revolutionary; they also demand no distinct profession of faith from their members. Otherwise with parliamentarism. If one embraces it, and if one wants to obtain a seat in parliament or congress, one must turn to such people as believe in the possibilities and capacities of this institution. It is out of the question to read them the Communist Manifesto. Or rather: it can be done if the object in view is exclusively political propaganda; but it can not be done if one wants to win the votes of electors. For good or ill, one must then rely on the “illusions of the masses”. The question as to what sort of following a professedly revolutionary party acquires through such sort of propaganda is best answered by answered the question: what do the voters, the “masses with the illusions”, expect of a “revolutionary” party to which they have given their votes? They expect from it that it will do what other parties have not as yet been able to bring about; namely: the liberation from all ills. Its following consists therefore of people who expect their liberation from anywhere except their own action. And this circumstance is not altered by the fact that the communist sections have stamped their voters as “professed revolutionists”. In order to cover up the fact that the leading “revolutionists,” the functionaries of the communist sections, had been transformed into philistines; the philistines voters were transformed with a shout in the communist press into revolutionists. And if the philistine voters would thus become so quickly and cheaply a revolutionist, then why could the revolutionist, the ordinary worker, not also be a philistine voter? He had, of course, the guarantee that his enthusiasm was not for parliamentarism without circumlocution, but for revolutionary parliamentarism. And so, from one “ballot battle” to the next, the membership of the communist sections was and is being educated to the conception that one may embrace both revolution and parliamentarism. Matters went still farther, however, so that quite soon the adherents of the communists sections no longer embraced the one as well as the other, but came to look upon “revolutionary parliamentarism” as **the** solution. “Without revolutionary parliamentarism no revolution!” What wonder that the communist section of Germany, for example, fell down so miserably: Hitler had actually, with a single stroke, torn away the basis of its revolution – parliamentarism. But before the good old institution had suffered this fate, it had plenty of time to vent its fury, it was able to disintegrate the ideologically best part of the working class and to defame individual revolutionists and groups thereof; in short: it was able to do a real job. Let us hold in further course to the German example. It was here that “revolutionary parliamentarism” celebrated its greatest triumphs.

Like all the baits which were presented in “ballot battles” for catching the little voting fish, so also “revolutionary parliamentarism” was at first nothing more than a theory in which the voters had to believe. Since the voter, as already stated, is just that person who can have confidence in everything except himself, in his own knowledge and

capacities, he therefore did not consider himself capable of testing the presented theories for their real value and soundness. And so the voter just believed: at one time, that it would be a good thing if the German Kaiser came back, – for which he settled in full with a ballot for the Conservatives – at another time, that it would be a good thing if a little more thought were again directed to god, who in the confusion of revolutionary events had been losing his following, – for which the voter settled in full with a ballot for the catholic Center – and still another time the voter had no particular belief about anything, and he voted for the strategists of “revolutionary” parliamentarism. Naturally, he had previous, for the sake of caution, “thoroughly tested” all the other promises put forth by the odd dozen political parties, and for this he had been given plenty of opportunity by the thirty or so parliamentary elections of the post-war period. The difference between the theories expounded in the elections and the practice followed in the parliaments was in 999 out of a thousand cases explained in a vulgar manner as being the result of the **unwillingness** of the parties to keep their promises. That the promises **could** not be redeemed, that the whole parliamentary business rested upon an **objective** and not upon a **subjective** swindle – such a realization would not be expected from a person who had no confidence in himself, hence also no confidence in his critical capacity.

He voted therefore – before in final despair he landed with the Nazis – “revolutionary”. And the number of those was not small who in such manner received the commission to disrupt from their seats in Parliament the present world economic order. That number, the number of the “revolutionary” parliamentarians, did not, to be sure, increase with the growing uncompromisingness of the communists toward the capitalist world, but it increased in the same measure in which the communists unscrupulously took over unto themselves all those election baits which had proved themselves highly effective when employed by the other parties. Until they finally came to the contest with Hitler: a contest which turned on the point as to which of the two parties was the real and only representative of “national” interests. The one side gladly admitted that the rabbi stank, while the other side was equally willing to recognize that the monk stank; it appears, alas, that Heine’s assertion of more than a hundred years ago, that they both stink, was all in vain.

Now it is extremely difficult to determine factually, on the basis of certain particulars, in what the difference consisted between theory and practice in the case of “revolutionary” parliamentarism, because, of course, the theory was an absurdity in itself, – as absurd as dry water or cold fire or, as previously here defined: revolutionary counter-revolution. One must therefore simply hold to what the communists held forth in connection with this slogan. And so it was learned that their theory represents practically two concrete things: exposure of the workers’ enemies, **and** parliamentary support of extra-parliamentary actions. The exposure was supposed to proceed in this way: that from the vantage position of the parliamentary benches there should be made public all the wrong which the ruling class and its open and concealed lackeys have committed against the working class. The press was then to provide for further dissemination; for all parliamentary speeches could be printed without fear of punishment, without regard for whether they were offensive or otherwise damaging to individuals or whole organizations. The second manner of parliamentary activity was thought of in this way: that when the workers for some reason or other come into motion against the employers, the communists, with speeches from the parliamentary benches, were to render assistance among the undecided. Naturally, here again by means of exposures. “Revolutionary” parliamentarism was therefore, as we see, exclusively a matter of exposures.

Exposures are naturally something precious, and they have constantly been employed in the workers’ struggle against their exploiters. But, strangely enough, they have been applied not only by the workers against the exploiters, but very frequently also the other way ‘round – and, as shown by Hitler’s victory after a great number of

parliamentary battles, with much greater success than by the communists. The exposing tactic is accordingly not in itself a revolutionary tactic, and, applied in Parliament, it does not logically make Parliament revolutionary. Generally considered, parliamentarism is simply nothing more than fifty percent self-glorification – hence propaganda for the next election – and fifty percent exposure.

That the success of the exposing was much slighter for the communists than for the Nazis has already been mentioned. But of course, this is still not to say **how** slight it was. Very probably, it was equal to zero. The alternating successes which the communists saw in the increase of the number of seats they occupied the various Parliaments were certainly attained by way of the enormous amount of individual propagandizing on the part of the army of nameless proletarians in the shops and relief stations. But that could not be confessed at any price; otherwise the bureaucracy casting furtive eyes on seats in Parliament would have lost every plausible ground on which to stand for election.

But apart from such a question, which can not be answered in a manner which is wholly satisfactory, there yet still remains a very essential question, namely: the cost of the questionable success of the exposing. It is well known that the communists in their hey-day – that is, shortly before they gave over the field without a struggle to Hitler – had nearly a hundred seats in the Reichstag. Hence from all parts of the country there came together in Berlin the communist forces most highly trained in agitation and propaganda, in order to witness in Parliament the flat, stale and unprofitable harangues of **other** parties. When things were running high, there was occasion once a week for a communist, in a three-quarter-hour speech to conduct **communistic** exposing. The number of times that the communists took the floor and the length of their speaking time was accordingly not left to their own discretion, but was governed in painfully exact manner in accordance with the order of business, which was loyally adhered to by the communists as well. In case, someone or other persisted in disregarding that order, he could be excluded for one or more sittings. In and of itself, that would have been no misfortune, if his pay had not been correspondingly cut.

Thus in order to deliver on three-quarter-hour exposing speech per week, there assembled in Berlin alone – not to speak of the odd dozen provincial Parliaments, which likewise swallowed a large number of good agitators – some hundred party functionaries (mainly secretaries and editors), who were thus made unavailable for any real party activity. If each of these functionaries had held only one meeting each week and if each of these meetings had been attended by only a hundred people – certainly a modest figure for Germany – in that case all conceivable exposing could have been conducted before ten thousand attentive listeners in speeches extending over one hour and thirty minutes. That is, the performance of each functionary would have been double that of the entire communist fraction in the Reichstag. In other words: the functionaries of the Reichstag fraction could have conducted two hundred times the amount of exposing if they had shifted their field of action from the Reichstag into the country. This numerical example may be applied also, if one likes, to the other Parliaments. It would then be seen how much time was squandered by the parliament-thirsty communist bureaucracy; time which might have been employed in providing a systematic revolutionary education of the working class.

It may be objected that certain exposures were in violation of law and that the exposing conducted in Parliament, even if unlawful, remained unpunished. Theoretically, that is correct, but practically quite without significance; for precisely during the time in which the communists were preaching the necessity of revolutionary parliamentarism, from the end of the war to Hitler, the propagandistic opportunities in Germany were ample. In case, however, a decisive exposing speech had once really been made, then the bourgeoisie

had only to clamp down on the newspapers to deprive it of any effect beyond the few listeners in parliament.

As a matter of fact, in the history of the German Reichstag there was only one solitary exposing speech to which success was generally attributed. It was the speech of Karl Liebknecht (1912) against the corruption which had arisen in the business connection between the army and its cannon-furnisher Krupp. To this example of exposing there might possibly be added the nicely memorized phrases that Philipp Scheidemann delivered in the Zabern military scandal; but this exhausts the list of all the exposings which bourgeoisie found painful. And the success? The officers involved were pensioned at the cost of the tax-payers or "fell up the steps". And yet it was precisely in the year 1913, hence in the midst of the exposing campaign, that the Social Democracy, by which this later exposure was conducted, for the first time granted financial means to Prussian-German militarism.

But of course, one may say, the communists are not social-democrats. And that is correct. For while the social-democrats still for a time shamefully opposed the war, among the communists this false shame has already quite vanished. In proof of this, there is no need to go back to the offer which Clara Zetkin at the time made in the Reichstag to the German Reichswehr. We have only to refer to the statement of the German delegate Wilhelm Pieck some weeks ago on the occasion of the world congress of the Comintern. He said, verbally: "A war conducted by a country with democratic government against a country with fascist government is a noble war, and the communists should take part in it." Perhaps the communists want to have the opportunity, through voluntary and active participation in capitalist wars, to expose the bad and unpatriotic conduct of war on the part of the bourgeoisie. In the case of the Comintern, one must of course be prepared for everything.

We might show, further, by way of a very pertinent example, that the communists in parliaments by no means constantly conducted that sort of exposing that borders on lese majesty or high treason, and which might have been dangerous to the press or to ordinary speakers at meetings. During the Ruhr occupation in 1923 a high official of the Ministry of Communications came to the Communist Reichstag fraction and produced the most detailed data regarding instructions of the government for blowing up blast furnaces, flooding shafts, disrupting canals and sluices – in short, for carrying out in the Ruhr district a "Hindenburg program". Various dynamitings had already taken place on a number of transport routes by the workers there employed, on instruction from "above". The conference at which the "Hindenburg program" was decided upon was held in the rooms of a ministry of the Reich and was attended, through delegates, by the following organizations: Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Communications, Social Democratic Party, Democratic Party, Center, General-German Trade-Union League, Hirsch-Dunker Trade Unions, Christian Trade-Union League and the legal shop councils concerned. All the data were first brought together in an article by a Reichstag member and offered to the *Rote Fahne* for publication. The paper declined publication on the ground that it would be prosecuted for high treason. The offer of a Reichstag member to take over the responsibility for the *Rote Fahne* the day on which the "exposure" was to appear was likewise declined, without any reason being given. Thereupon an attempt was made to lay bare the criminal beginning of the Cuno government by way of a "Little Inquiry" addressed to the Reichstag. The communist fraction, however, forbade the member in question to present the "Little Inquiry". A few days later came one of the "great discussions" frequent at the time. In the joint session of the fraction and of the central committee of the Communist Party preceding this discussion it was decided, in spite of the pressure of two deputies and against their votes, that the fraction's speaker was not to mention the "Hindenburg program". And so it was done. All which **we** feel in duty bound to expose in

order not only to show how little effective parliamentary exposures are, but also how little subjective will is involved behind the objective paltriness. What, then, still remains over the bombastic theory of exposing? Nothing but a veil behind which those parliamentary bourgeois conceal themselves who need the votes of anti-capitalist but still innocent proletarians, or else the votes of those who had already tried all other parties and been disappointed. This latter sort, which questionably made up the majority of the communist votes for parliament, finally landed with Hitler.

Let us now turn to the cases of "parliamentary support of extra-parliamentary actions", which by the side of the exposures are to furnish the justification for the entrance of communists into bourgeois Parliaments. For this purpose, let us imagine that a considerable part of the workers has for some reason or other come into actions. It is not to be assumed that this happened because a parliamentarian made a speech. Actions of the workers have a more material basis than the mere effect of a speech. The reason, however, which led to the action determines also its direction and its fate. Actions in connection with a strike, for example, proceed in the direction of winning the strike. They pass beyond their initial character when the ruling class, through economic or political reprisals forces upon them other means of attack or defense. If in a strike the situation for the workers is favorable – that is, if they have a good prospect of attaining the immediate goal – they will leave off with a mere strike, and the best parliamentary speech ever delivered will not result in so much as the stirring of a mouse. On the other hand, when the prospects were bad, there has never been a case in which the parliamentary speeches of the communists were able to convert such unpromising undertakings into promising ones. Here also let us take an example from the more recent history of the labor movement. When in March 1921 the uprising which goes by the name of the "March action" took place in Central Germany, it was in so far "supported" by the communist Reichstag fraction as one of its speakers called on the workers to "seize arms wherever they can be found". Now it is well known that this central-German uprising was strictly an armed affair, and logically the workers took not only arms where they could find them, but also other things which were necessary to the open struggle with the white guardists. Naturally, the workers had the arming action already long behind them at the time the call for it came from the parliamentary field. Scope, course and fate of the uprising remained also absolutely unaffected by communist speeches, which received their most attentive reading from the German judges who later sent the insurrectionary workers to the penitentiaries. The nature of the uprising made it a sort of guerilla struggle, and this in turn determined its scope and course. The guerilla struggle naturally resulted in group-forming, and these groups in turn had to bring forth leaders who, thrown entirely upon their own resources, could not pay the slightest attention to communist speeches in the Reichstag. And because they could not, and therefore quite reasonably did not, they were dubbed bandit ringleaders in the party press. Such the nature of the parliamentary support of extra-parliamentary actions. It reveals itself, exactly like the exposing, as a bluff, the disingenuous nature of which is not perceived by the uncritical worker and for which he therefore falls.

The working class must learn to ask: "What is the parliament (or congress)?" and not as hitherto: "Who represents my interests in the Parliament (or Congress)?" At best, the Parliament is the means with which there can be undertaken a suitable distribution of the sphere of power and interests between the individual capitalistic rivals. In effect, then, an instrument for setting the conflicts of interests within the ruling class itself, and hence a means of strengthening the ruling class. To grant to the suppressed class, by way of parliament, any political or economic advantage whatsoever, would merely mean to give back to the working class, without a struggle, what the exploiting class daily pillages from it with much pains and no little danger. Anyone who considers the ruling class and

especially its parliamentary sycophants to be so “soft”, let him calmly keep on voting. Anyone, however, who has no illusions regarding the essence of capitalism, leaves the babbling bourgeois to themselves and forms with his class comrades an army which doesn't treat with the bourgeoisie but brings it low.

W.T.

Table of Contents