A government of the working class

By Karl Radek

THE starting point of our activities must be the demand for higher wages, the demand for retention of the eight-hour day and the demand for the development of the Industrial council movement. But these demands do not suffice. Workers who belong to no political party at all can and do demand the daily wage of one thousand marks, whilst five hundred marks will not procure them the necessaries of life. But they see that to increase their wages in paper money provides no issue from their troubles. To begin with, such watchwords may suffice but the longer the struggle lasts, the more essential does it become to proclaim political watchwords, the watchwords of social organisation. When the time is ripe for the voicing of such demands, it is time to move from the defensive to the offensive. We must put forward in these circumstances the demand for control of production and make clear to the workers that this is the only way out of economic chaos.

What are the masses of the workers, not merely the Communists, thinking of when they speak of Workers' Governments? I confine myself to countries in which these ideas have already found an echo: Britain, Germany, and Czechoslovakia. In England, think of the Labour Party. Communism there is not yet a mass power. In the countries where capitalism is decaying, this idea is intimately associated with that of the United Front. Just as the workers say that the meaning of the United Front is that the Communists and Social-Democrats must make common cause in the factory when there is a strike, so for the masses of the workers the idea of a Workers' Government has a similar significance. The workers are thinking of a government of all the working class parties.

What does that mean for the masses practically and politically? The political decision on the question will depend on the fact whether the social-democracy does or does not go with the bourgeoisie. Should it do so, then the Workers' Government can only take the form of the dictatorship of the Communist proletariat. We cannot decide for the social democrats what their policy should be. What we have to decide is this. When we lead the masses in the struggle against the capitalist offensive, are we ready to fight on behalf of such a labour coalition government? Are we or are we not ready to bring about the conditions essential to its realisation?

In my opinion, when we are concerned with the struggle for the United Front, we ought to say bluntly that, if the social-democratic workers will force their leaders to break with the bourgeoisie, then we are ready to participate in a labour government, so long as that government is an instrument of the class struggle. I mean, if it is ready to fight beside us shoulder to shoulder.

What we have in mind is not a parliamentary combination, but a platform for the mobilisation of the masses, an arena for the struggle. The form the question takes is this. Will the social-democrats be excluded from the coalition by the bourgeoisie; will they continue to rot in the coalition; or shall we help the masses to compel them to fight? Perhaps you will ask why the deuce we should bother what they do? If it only concerned the fate of the leaders of the social-democrats, we should certainly be quite happy to leave them to rot. But when the question at issue is the mobilisation of the social-democratic masses, we must formulate a positive programme

To what extent does such a programme conflict with the dictatorship of the proletariat? To what extent does it conflict with the civil war? It conflicts to the same extent to which an ante-room conflicts with the room to which it leads. As far as we are concerned with the broad front of the proletarian struggle for freedom the watchword of the workers' government is necessary to supply us with a directive; it is a watchword that whets the edge of our political weapons. The moment when the workers find themselves simultaneously engaged in the fight for the workers' government and in the fight for control of production, will be the moment when our fundamental offensive will begin, the moment when we shall cease to content ourselves with trying to defend what we have, and shall advance to the attack on new positions! Our offensive will begin as soon as the workers are ready to fight for these two watchwords.

"The moment when the workers find themselves simultaneously engaged in the fight for the workers' government and in the fight for control of production, will be the moment when our fundamental offensive will begin."

Even in the countries where we have the best developed parties, our agitation still exhibits an abstract character, it is not yet instinct with the passion of persons convinced they are fighting for aims realisable in the near future. All their work produces the impression of pure agitation. If we desire that our debates shall not die of anaemia, and that our congresses shall not resemble party conventicles in which nothing but theoretical evolutionary tendencies are discussed, the parties must pursue in practice a very different policy from that they have pursued in the past. There must be a change, not merely in political aim, but also in the energy of the struggle.

The Communist International is not merely the party for the conquest of power, it is the party for conducting the fight. It is nonsense, therefore, to say: "These are piping times of peace, so the party cannot fight." Such a view would make of the Communist International a parasite upon the proletarian world revolution instead of a combatant on its behalf. The watchword must be not one of disillusionment and of waiting for the revolution, but one of fighting for every inch of ground. All our discussions are devoid of meaning unless we understand that we can only form Communist Parties upon condition that their main activity is not to be in the rooms where resolutions are passed and studied, but on the battlefield where our aims find practical fulfilment, in the United Front of the proletariat, in the fight along the lines that are made actual by contemporary history.

Comrades, I want to say a few words about the peril from the Right. How does the British Communist Party apply its United Front tactics? It says: "We are a section of the working class, namely its Left Wing. Nevertheless, we want to stand together with all the other workers' parties." Whither Naomi goes thither goes Ruth also. And then the election address goes on: "What is the Labour Party? The workers are fine fellows, they want to fight, but the leaders are not quite so fine." And then it says: "In the past as in the present there was treachery on the part of the leaders. Such treachery might happen once. But nevertheless, the Labour Party is against the capitalists." By Jove, if this is a sample of unity tactics, perhaps we better leave them alone. The Executive has shown in its manifesto that the entire policy of the Labour Party is nothing but a continuous betrayal of working class interests. But the Executive also said to the workers: If the Labour Party is victorious and forms a government, it will betray you in the end and will show to the workers that its aim is the perpetuation of capitalism. Then the workers will either desert it or the Labour Party will be compelled to fight owing to the pressure of the workers, and in that case we shall back it. We issued a definite watchword: vote for it, but prepare to struggle against it. If thereupon comrade Webb comes here and warns us against the opportunists, we can only say to him: "Comrade Webb, book your berth as quickly as possible and return to England, in order to fight against opportunism there, and you will have our heartiest support".

Karl Radek was a revolutionary active in the German, Polish, and Russian revolutionary movements, and an early leader of the Left Opposition. (He later capitulated to Stalinism, then fell victim to Stalin's purges.) This speech is from the Fourth Congress of the Communist International in 1922.