
Our Attitude Towards the Third Party

by Max Bedacht

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The radical comrades won a great victory at the Convention of the Workers Party [3rd: Chicago: Dec. 30, 1923-Jan. 2, 1924], was the joyful report made by the *Volkszeitung* to its readers on New Year's day. And a few days later a leading article crowned the brow of comrade [Ludwig] Lore with a laurel crown for this "victory" and added that the victory is still not complete and that difficult struggles are ahead.

And the discussion thus far in the *Volkszeitung* seems to represent the heavy blows of the opponent in this hard struggle against the theses of the Central Executive Committee.

May I remark that something more than an assertion of a report in the *Volkszeitung* is needed to make the world believe that the Finnish language group in alliance with Comrades Lore, [Alexander] Trachtenberg, [Juliet] Poyntz, etc. are all at once promoted to custodians of radicalism in the Party. Particularly Comrade Poyntz, who every time she regards her calloused laborer's fists can suppress only with difficulty a fit of rage against the wicked intellectuals and "non-workers" in the Party.¹

¹ Bedacht is being sarcastic. Juliet Stuart Poyntz (1886-1937?), the daughter of a lawyer, held a Master's Degree from Columbia University and was long employed in sundry Left Wing academic and educational ventures. Poyntz worked variously as a researcher for the US Immigration Commission and for the American Association for Labor Legislation, as an instructor at the Socialist Party's Rand School of Social Science, as education director of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, and as director of the New York Workers' School of the Workers Party of America.

The manner in which the discussion has been carried on up to now is not calculated to clarify the question. It creates confusion rather, and tends to discredit our Party in the eyes of the non-members.

The very least that can be expected of those taking part in the debate is that they shall get clear on the object of the debate. Comrade Berner is the only one who has done that. He comes to the conclusion that the majority of the previous Executive Committee was in the right.² Nevertheless, strangely enough, he is against their proposal.

A few of the participants in the debate, as for instance "Marius," formulate the sins of the Executive out of the inexhaustible realm of their imagination, and then, with a grand gesture they refuse absolution for these sins. Besides, the discussion is no "free for all fight," but an earnest Party discussion, and party comrades cannot and should not hide behind pseudonyms in such discussions.

The Problem Before Us.

What is the problem?

The November Theses [1923] of the Party Executive are under discussion. Not only those paragraphs which specify the attitude of the Party towards an eventual Third Party, but also the analysis of the present political situation laid down in the theses. The conclusions of the author and exponent of the theses are built upon this analysis. Either the opponents of these theses have something to advance against this analysis. In that case, where is their own analysis? Or they accept this analysis and in that case they must admit that we have a difficult problem to solve. The authors and exponents of the November Theses propose a solution. The opponents condemn this solution. But the problem remains. Where is the solution which the opponents of the November Theses propose? Either one has sufficient understanding of the problem so as to be able to solve it in a better way than the one proposed, and if so well and good, out with it. Or per-

² That is, the Pepper-Ruthenberg-Lovestone faction, of which Bedacht was a leading member.

haps one has no such understanding and thereby one forfeits the right of criticism.

Here is the situation:

During the start of the forward development of capitalism in the United States in the exploitation of the natural resources and markets of the country there were always enough crumbs which fell for the pygmies from the tables of the giants of the capitalist class, so that the pygmies submitted more or less willingly to the political leadership of the giants. But the giants have now reached the peak of imperialist development and their group interests collide more and more with the group interests of the pygmies. This period of capitalist development gives rise to independent political movements of the various lower strata of the capitalist class. These movements are produced from very real special interests of capitalist groups, special interests which in the political program of the imperialists, not only find no provision for themselves, but are even directly disregarded for the sake of the imperialist group interests. No one of us claims that these small capitalist special interests can be the ground for a real, advanced political party. On the contrary. But the vehemence with which these political special interests seek to assert themselves is a proof of the incipient inner decay of the ruling, the capitalist class.

This decay in turn is the prerequisite for the assumption of political power in society by the working class. We are therefore interested in this decay not only as complacent onlookers but we must help to hasten the process of decay. We should not confine ourselves to interpreting history, but our task is to make history. Wherever there is a possibility of furthering the inner process of decay, yes, the inner dissolution of the ruling class, it is our duty to take a hand at it. Naturally none of us has the illusion that the ruling class will of itself collapse from this decay. But the continuation of this decay brings the development of the deciding factors of the social revolution, "the formation of the proletariat into a class" which stands up independently and in the end fights the class struggle inexorably to its logical conclusion under the leadership of a Marxian, revolutionary party.

Thus the growth of the political self-consciousness of the workers goes hand in hand with this inner dissolution of the ruling class. The process of dissolution within the capitalist class of the United States

manifests itself concretely, partly in the stubborn movement which aims at the founding of a Third Party, while the political awakening of the working class finds its expression in the movement for a working class party in alliance with the poor farmers.

These two phenomena appear in parallel lines. No, parallel is not exact. Yes, simultaneously, but not beside each other. Rather with each other and in each other. That makes our task harder. But then, politics is not so simple. It's all very well to sit home and lay out the formula: Here the working class — there the capitalist class. But in actual reality it is absolutely impossible to find a solution of the political problems of the class struggle on the basis of this formula.

It shows a very praiseworthy instinct for antiquities when our comrades dig up again the Lassallean formula discarded and buried 50 years ago, of “one reactionary mass.”

And so we have two simultaneous tendencies before us. The tendency of the lower middle class to emancipate itself from big capital. And the tendency of the working class to emancipate itself politically from the whole capitalist class. These tendencies seem to run into each other inextricably. There may be difference of opinion among us over the question of whether it is part of our task to further the first tendency and assist at the formation of a Third Party. But, with the exception of a few incurable “Lefts,” we are unanimous in this, that it is our task to further the tendency of the working class to emancipate itself from the leadership of the capitalist class. But when the ugly reality insists stubbornly in presenting the working class to us, not as a pure, filtered, and crystallized group with which and in which we can maneuver without having to come near any impure lower middle class persons; and on the contrary, the working class and its tendency is permeated with the lower middle class and its tendency — what ought we to do? That is our problem. And here comrade Wenderich lays down our duty categorically: *Hic Rhodus, Hic Salta*.³ Yes, we must

³ This expression originated as a punchline of Aesop's fable “The Braggart,” about an athlete that told the tale of a great pole vault he had made previously, a feat for which the athlete swore he could produce witnesses to attest. To this statement came the retort, “*Hic Rhodus, Hic Salta*” — literally, “Here is a rod, here you jump” or figuratively, “no need to produce witnesses — put up or shut up.” The aphorism was used in a political context by both Hegel and Marx (and Bedacht here) to the effect of “so much for theorizing, demonstrate in the real world.”

do our part. But not like the cat before the hot porridge, to slink off finally because we don't like to risk burning our mouth. No, the porridge must be eaten. The question is now whether we should eat it, but how can we eat it without spoiling our stomach.

I don't want to dispute with Comrade Wenderich over his characterization of the great Peasants' Revolt when he offhandedly turns that heroic peasant movement against serfdom into a reactionary movement against the rising power of industry (power of industry in the 16th Century???)

Nor do I want to dispute with him when he makes out the fight of the Boer Republic against the aggression of English imperialism to be simply a reactionary movement against a modern industrial state. (This conception certainly gives a wonderful argument for Noske's "Socialist colonial policy.") But I must advise him earnestly to read the theses of the 2nd Congress of the Third International [July 19-Aug. 7, 1920] over the agrarian question. I want to remind him and other "radicals" in this question that Serrati and other "Lefts" in that Congress made an opposition of principle against the intended "betrayal" by the Third International of the pure Marxian principles.

What is a Reactionary Movement?

What then is all this outcry over the inherent reactionary character of all farmer movements? Have we really learned nothing from the Second International?

No class is reactionary in "principle" on the ground of its ideological stand, but only as a result of its class interests. Either the farmers are reactionary to the marrow because their class interests demand it — in this case what becomes of the advice that their salvation lies in solidarity with the working class? Or perhaps there is a community of interest between sections of the farming class and the working class. In that case what becomes of the talk of farmers being reactionary under all circumstances? How can you say, Comrade Lore, that sections of farmers are sympathetic towards our movement if there is no community of interest of some kind between sections of farmers and of the working class? But if there is such community of interests why could we not win over such strata to our movement? The essence

of our attitude towards the farmers is not that they are reactionary under all circumstances, but that historically they are a class of the past and not like the working class, the class of the future. For this reason even with a revolutionary stand against the existing system, they could never assume the leadership and initiative of the revolutionary movement. The leadership belongs to the working class. But the revolutionary farmer groups must be won over to this leadership.

In this connection every comrade should read the excellent article of Comrade Pepper, "The Farmers and the American Revolution," published in the supplement of *The Daily Worker* of January 19 [1924], as well as the article of Comrade Zinoviev for *The Daily Worker* published in the *Worker* of January 21.

And so the working class presents itself to us as an object for operation which is not clearly separated from all non-proletarian elements, but is pervaded with lower middle class politicians, and controlled by a capitalist ideology. The class separation, although a social fact, is not a prerequisite of our operation, but should be its result. This separation must be first created politically.

What Shall We Do?

How can we accomplish this titanic task? Quite simply the opponents of the theses say: We must agitate; we must educate the working class. We must make the farmers sympathetic. Correct. But how? Our party is no workers' educational society which "educates" the working class through courses on national economy, but a political party which engages in political action. It is our task to teach the working class the art of swimming the waves of the sea of political class struggle. That does not mean to introduce the workers to this sport theoretically, but we must throw ourselves into the waves before their eyes, and we must get them to jump in with us, we must put at the disposal of the working class our capabilities, our experiences, our energy, our fearlessness. And who will propose that we should leave the swimmer in the lurch in that very moment when he is in danger of sinking in the whirlpool of his petty bourgeois ideology? The working class in its mass does not learn through theoretical propaganda, but in the school of experience. Either we are present where

the school is and through our activity as teaching fellow-combatants make it easier for the working class to assimilate its own experiences, or we resign as proletarian political leaders and Marxians.

The political situation presents us therefore with a concrete problem. Two simultaneous tendencies: a Third Party tendency under the lower middle class and a class party under the workers and farmers. And before us an election year which stimulates these tendencies immensely. At the extreme right of this group we find the lower middle class political leaders of a Third Party. At the extreme left are the Communists, the eventual leaders of the working class. And between the two, the unclear and confused mass.

The lower middle class politicians aim to drive the working class from its political wagon. The capitalist ideology which controls the laboring masses favors them in this venture. The Communists must therefore fight against the lower middle class politicians for the souls of the workers and poor farmers in this mass which is not exactly definable. They therefore throw themselves into this mass and recruit their forces. They attempt to crystallize the workers' class party tendency, before it is drowned even if only temporarily, in a Third Party. The founding of the Federated Farmer-Labor Party is the immediate result of this effort. This Party is only the beginning of this process of crystallization. The Federated Farmer-Labor Party does not solve the problem. It only creates a more advantageous basis of operation for the solution. It has put the whole Left Wing of the class party movement among the workers and poor farmers under the influence and leadership of the Communists and it has thus multiplied its force in the campaign for a class party.

This also determines the role of the Federated Farmer-Labor Party. We cannot remain standing with it. In the Federated Farmer-Labor Party and through it we increased our basis of operation by a great deal. New attempts must be made to crystallize into organization the class party tendencies among the workers and poor farmers. Not abstractly on the ground of theories and empty resolutions, but on the ground of real and true political group organization for the coming elections.

The St. Paul Conference.

Thus we come to the Conference in St. Paul on May 30 [1924].⁴ For our purposes it is unnecessary to speculate as to whether the Conference really takes place. There may be another conference, or even a series of similar conferences.

As the two tendencies described are not exactly marked off and separated, both tendencies will find expression at every such conference. And the struggle at any such conference will take place between the Communists and the lower middle class politicians, the Communists as the conscious fighters for the working class party on one side, and the lower middle class politicians as the clearest representative of the Third Party on the other side, and the workers and poor farmers represented at the conference form the object of the struggle. The Communists want a clear separation of workers and poor farmers from the Third Party, and in this way from the political leadership of the middle class. The lower middle class politicians in turn want a separation of workers from the Communists. The Communists are the only ones who exert themselves seriously to withdraw the working class from the political influence of all strata of the capitalist class and with time to make it impossible for the capitalist class to utilize the political power of the working class for its own purposes.

If we should be victorious in this fight at the Conference, because we succeed in consolidating the workers and poor farmers represented into a political united front on a class basis with a realistic class program, our problem is solved. But if the laboring masses and poor farmers there represented are still so much dominated by capitalist ideology that their indefinite longing for a class party is satisfied by the Third Party, if they therefore accept the political leadership of the lower middle class even if temporarily, what should we do in that case? Here begins our problem.

In a leading article of the *Volkszeitung* of January 17 [1924], we find that the writer of the article, Comrade Lore, without a doubt, is not opposed to having the lower middle class farmers and the city

⁴ May 30, 1924 was the date sought by the WPA for a national convention of the Farmer-Labor Party in St. Paul, MN. The date of the event was subsequently moved to June 17 due to the objections of the WPA's Minnesota allies.

population made sympathetic through the propaganda of the Communist movement. But that does not mean that we should enter together with them into a party organization, there to lose our identity. Comrade Lore, we do not discuss in order to force through our views under all circumstances, but to draw out the best for our Party and for the movement. For this reason it should be the first comradesly duty not to twist consciously and to represent falsely. I ask you what member of the Executive has made a proposal inside or outside this body, which even with biased interpretation could be made to seem that it called for our entering a lower middle class party, and within it to give up finally the identity of the Workers Party? Not only was such a proposal never made, but the so greatly disgraced old majority of the Executive combatted energetically even the desire of the close allies of Comrade Lore to give up the identity of the Federated Farmer-Labor Party within a greater Labor Party. It declared again and again that the Labor Party in itself is not our aim, but that it must simply create more favorable conditions for the organization of the proletariat as a class. And for this reason our task after the founding of the Labor Party is not solved. And an organized Left Wing in the Labor Party will make our task considerably lighter. This Left Wing is the Federated Farmer-Labor Party.

If at any time the Executive or any one of its members made a proposal such as the one intimated by you, it would have been your urgent duty, Comrade Lore, at the deciding session of the Executive not simply to give a few shabby moments to the whole object of discussion, as you did, but you should have sounded the alarm, by immediately bringing up accusation against the treacherous Executive before the Communist International. You did not do that, because no such proposal or similar proposal was ever made by anyone at any time. To make this assertion, however, at this time in the debate, to say the least, is not a wholly irreproachable tactic for a guardian of pure Communist principles.

The Compromise Bugaboo.

In the discussion there is constant talk of compromise with the lower middle class. Who has ever made such a proposal? Concessions

are proposed. But not concessions tot the lower middle class; only concessions to the working class, whose minds are unfortunately still filled with lower middle class illusions.

No compromise with the lower middle class is proposed. But also no flight from the great mass of workers and poor farmers, simply because they have not yet freed themselves from all capitalist ideology.

Furthermore, we should do everything to snatch the workers and poor farmers from the leadership of the lower middle class and to separate them from the lower middle class. If we do not succeed in doing this we will at least not permit the lower middle class to separate us from the laboring masses through our own free and voluntary abdication.

And finally we should warn the workers in this case of the results of their submission to the leadership of lower middle class politicians. We should prophesy the unavoidable deception which such a leadership must result in for the masses of workers and poor farmers. But we should not be merely prophets; we must in the first place have a policy. Thus, we must do everything that is necessary in order to convert our momentary defeat into a later victory, but we must not flee. To flee would mean that we give up the fight for the leadership of these masses and that we surrender these masses to the lower middle class leadership for better or for worse.

In fighting for the souls of the laboring masses and revolutionary farmers we can not expect to be victorious immediately in the first encounter. Therefore, after we have shown up the lower middle class sufficiently, we will declare that we will not desert the laboring masses despite their mistake, which in our opinion they have made. We will support their candidates and so prepare the school of experience for the workers, which will complete what our propaganda has not completed, the destruction of lower middle class illusions of the laboring masses. We will therefore support the lower middle class politicians, in the words of Lenin, as a rope supports a hanged man.

To see a *compromise with the lower middle class* in the proposed tactics of the Executive, or even an attempt to dissolve our party in a lower middle class party shows a great lack of understanding of the problems before us and it shows an opposition to the united front tactic. Nobody wants a compromise with the lower middle class. But

in the interest of the successful achievement of the united front tactics we must make concession to the petty bourgeois ideology of the laboring masses. Only in this way can we hope to overcome this ideology in *common action*.

The tactics of the united front have their dangers, especially for such comrades who fear too strong a test of their Communist fundamentals. Such comrades at times convince themselves that their stand is more radical, more pure in principle, than that of the opponents of concrete united front tactics. But the characterization of the Right elements of the Communist Party of France, which was hostile to the united front, the characterization made by Comrade Zinoviev at the Enlarged Executive of the Communist International in February [1st: Feb. 24-March 4, 1922], applies to these comrades in our Party. Zinoviev said there that the Right Wing of the French Party fought against the united front ostensibly to prove the purity of their principles. In reality, however, these comrades had so little confidence in this purity that they feared to appear in a united front with non-Communist workers, because they were not certain that these workers will not be able to distinguish them from non-Communists.

The problem before us is not a compromise with the lower middle class, but the question of how we Communists can free the masses of workers and poor farmers from the influence of lower middle class ideology and leadership. Our answer is: through *political action*. This answer of the supposed “Lefts” is: through *political “propaganda.”* It is not very hard to decide.

But until this decision has been definitely made, we should confine the discussion to party comrades. We should guard against sowing mistrust outside against our party and our movement. Have those who with such self-confidence have raised the accusation of reformism stopped to consider what they would do if the decision goes against them? By what means will they restore the confidence in the Party among those outside of the Party, the confidence which they now destroy with such a light heart, so as not to miss the opportunity to score a run in the race, and not because they want to find the right thing for the Party, but to be “right” in any case.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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