

Notes of the Month

Twenty Years of the Communist Party—From the First to the Second Imperialist War—The Foundation of the Communist Party—The Answer to a Historic Bankruptcy—A New Departure—The Shattering of Illusions—Organisation and Leadership—A Living Growth—The Old and the New—A Revolutionary Epoch—The Conception of the Party—A Life-and-Death Question—Internationalism—Dead Controversies—Communism Comes into Its Own—The Unity of the Mass Movement and Communism

THE Twentieth Anniversary of the Communist Party takes place in a situation which justifies all the teachings of Communism and in which the salvation of humanity depends on the leadership of Communism. The present is no time for idle commemorations. But this Twentieth Anniversary of the Communist Party is no idle commemoration: it is the sharpest reminder of the most urgent lessons and needs which go to the heart of the present situation, and of issues which hold in the scales the balance of life or death for millions of human beings and for the future of human society. In other times this Twentieth Anniversary might have been celebrated with greater freedom of pageantry and processions, with larger amplitude of unhindered demonstrations to testify the enthusiasm of the working class for its political party, forged through two decades of struggle, and its daily paper maintained in the teeth of a thousand obstacles. But the storm and stress of the present period is in reality the best and truest setting for this Twentieth Anniversary. The Communist Party was born out of the deep crisis of the old society and the old Labour Movement which began with the first imperialist war. It enters on its Twentieth Anniversary in the midst of the second imperialist war and visibly developing new world revolutionary wave which bears on its crest the issue of capitalism or socialism for the leading countries of the world. The Communist Party approaches its greatest tasks for which all these twenty years have been a preparation. To turn aside for a moment from comment on the current flux of events in order to draw the lessons of these twenty years is not in fact to draw aside from the current situation, but to draw closer to it. The completion of these twenty years affords the occasion, not for retrospect—there is no time for this—but for a mountain-top view of the whole epoch through which we have travelled and are travelling, in order to burn out all pettiness and weakness of vision and temper, and illuminate anew with greater certainty and confidence than ever before our historic road.

THE Communist Party was the child of the general crisis of capitalism which began with the war of 1914 and has developed continuously since. The war of 1914 not only demonstrated the bankruptcy of the old capitalist society which was rotten-ripe for destruction and for the transition to socialism. It also demonstrated the bankruptcy of the old labour movement

which was incapable of carrying through the necessary change. The present war of 1939 broke upon a world which had already lost all confidence in stability, was growing hardened to violence and catastrophic change, and was profoundly conscious of the revolution maturing and advancing in its midst. The transition from the partial state of war preceding 1939 to the extended war which opened in 1939 and which only stage by stage unfolded its character and is now developing toward world war, was not a sudden break, but a step in a continuous process, and not an unexpected step. But the war of 1914 was a real watershed dividing the old and the new. It broke upon a world in which all sections save the revolutionary Marxists were completely unconscious of the character of the historical epoch in which they were living, were swimming in a sea of illusions, and for whom the outbreak of war and its consequences came like the end and the shattering of the whole world they had known.

IT is only necessary to survey the pre-1914 literature of the British Labour Movement, of the Fabians and liberal-socialists who dominated its ideology and guided its leadership, to realise the bland, complacent self-satisfied blindness and fantastic inappropriateness of its world conception (or rather, absence of any world conception save the philistine assumption of the permanence of the institutions within which its pretty schemes of reforms were elaborated) in contrast to the realities which followed. Only revolutionary Marxism correctly diagnosed the epoch and—in the one country where it led the labour movement—rode the storm. In the other countries the war was a shattering blow which compelled a complete new facing of the problems of the labour movement. The outcome of this new awakening was the foundation of the Communist Party. The very conditions of the preceding epoch which had been correctly diagnosed by Marxism had at the same time corrupted and undermined its influence in the labour movement. Therefore the first imperialist war, which should have led—had the subjective conditions been ready—to the victory of the working class revolution in all the countries of Europe, could only lead to the first step, the re-awakening and organisational separation of revolutionary Marxism in preparation for what was to follow. It remains for the second imperialist war to complete the process in the realm of action.

THE foundation of the Communist Party was thus the answer of the militant working class to a historic bankruptcy, and the one positive outcome achieved by the working class in the capitalist world from the war of 1914 and the defeat of the revolutionary strivings which followed it. The Communist Party was founded in 1920. It was founded, that is to say, *after* the completion of the first imperialist war, and *after* the revolutionary wave which followed the war had already reached its highest point and was approaching its ebb. The establishment of the Councils of Action in August, 1926, which coincided with the foundation of the Communist Party, and which openly challenged the power of the British capitalist State and Government and forced its temporary retreat from its war plans against the Russian Workers' State, was the last high point of the revolutionary wave which followed the war. Thereafter followed the economic crisis and mass unemployment which began in the winter of 1920, and the low point of Black Friday in the spring of 1921.

In the first number of the *LABOUR MONTHLY*, which appeared in July, 1921, the lessons of Black Friday were still the centre of discussion. The Communist Party thus came into existence *at the close of a revolutionary period*, not at its opening. It could not lead the revolutionary movement which followed the war. It could only draw and embody the lessons for the future. Hence the long period of upward struggle through which it had to pass before the situation began to open out anew. Hence the significance of the present anniversary which falls in the midst of the new cycle of wars and revolutions now developing.

ALL the lessons of the preceding years were embodied in the foundation of the Communist Party. The war of 1914 had shattered the illusions of peaceful progress within capitalist society. It had proved in the eyes of all thoughtful workers the complete and unmitigated failure of the old forms and leadership of the labour movement, which had neither been able to prevent the mutual slaughter of millions of workers, nor to utilise the resultant crisis to lead the rising anger and struggle of the workers against capitalism, but had actually become the bulwark of capitalism against the working class. It became clear that a new departure was necessary, that the problem of a political party of the working class capable of leading the struggle against capitalism had not been solved by the foundation of the Labour Party, but had still to be solved.

IN the long preceding period of relatively peaceful legal conditions in the metropolitan centres of imperialism (with the wars and open violence transferred to the colonial periphery, only later to return from thence with a hundredfold increased intensity), the whole routine, organisation, outlook and leadership of the traditional labour movements of the leading countries of imperialism had become intertwined with the old corrupt dying society, and therefore completely incapable of conducting a basic offensive against it when the need arose. The war of 1914 dealt a shattering blow (though not yet the final blow) to the illusions which had overgrown and permeated the old labour movement. It laid bare the jungle-horrors of the dying capitalist régime dragging mankind into the abyss. It revealed with burning illumination (later to be reinforced by the example of the Russian Revolution) the task of international socialism, of the working class revolution, as the only power to save mankind.

BUT the shattering of old illusions and the laying bare of the only path forward did not and could not of itself create the readiness and capacity of the working class to fulfil its historic rôle, where the working class had not evolved beforehand the requisite *organisation* and *leadership* for the achievement of its revolutionary task. Only in that country where, owing to a series of exceptional conditions (including the weakness of imperialism and the strength of revolutionary traditions), the working class had been able to evolve beforehand its revolutionary Marxist party and leadership, closely linked up with and leading the mass movement, only there was the working class able to conquer power and advance to socialism. In the other countries the experience of the war and of the years succeeding the war was an experience of defeat. The militant workers drew the lesson. In Britain and in every

country the militant workers in the post-war period set themselves the task of building their Communist Party.

THE significance of the foundation of the Communist Party in Britain in 1920, as the most important step of the militant workers since the days of Chartism to break decisively with the weaknesses of the intervening period of the labour movement and lead the way forward to the working class revolution, will be finally proved, not by assertion, but by the only valid test—the historical outcome. Because the Communist Party was a living growth, a living expression and outcome of the whole preceding experience of the working class movement, therefore the Communist Party did not come into being ready-formed and complete, but grew out of the preceding elements and groupings with all their weaknesses who still only partially expressed the striving of the working class towards revolutionary policy and organisation, and had to find its way forward through struggle, through mistakes, through trial and error, to forge the first nucleus of a revolutionary party of the working class. The history of this process, which is still going forward to its final completion, is the history of these two decades, which are rich in a thousand experiences of the forming and moulding from the original heterogeneous elements a disciplined and experienced political vanguard of the working class.

THE Communist Party was at once a re-assertion of all that was best and strongest in the traditions of the old working class movement, and a decisive break with all the enemy influences, imperialist corruption and political and organisational vices which were strangling the old movement. It was a re-assertion of the revolutionary traditions and aspirations which in the days of Chartism had placed the British working class in the vanguard of the international working class and had helped to form the theory of Marx and Engels, and which in the subsequent period had been temporarily suffocated by the corruption of the capitalist world monopoly. It was a re-assertion of the aims and strivings of the early socialist pioneers, of whom the best and truest representative, Tom Mann, carried forward the banner to his honoured place on the Central Committee of the Communist Party. It was a re-assertion of the programme of Marxism, which had been thrust aside by the miserable tenth-rate substitutes of Fabianism, MacDonaldism and similar milk-and-water rehashes of liberal capitalist humbug. It was a re-assertion of the militancy and class-conscious awakening which had been expressed in the pre-1914 labour unrest and in the shop steward movement during the war. It was a break with the liberal-labour corruption, the parliamentary cretinism, the narrow craft trade unionism and sectionalism, the jingoism, white chauvinism and national insularity, the snobbery and tailing after the capitalist class, which had disgraced the dominant sections of the old labour movement and brought it to impotence and disaster.

THE founders and early builders of the Communist Party were inspired by the new basic conceptions which their whole experience of the preceding years had taught them. They understood that the epoch which had opened with the war of 1914 was a revolutionary epoch; that imperialism could offer nothing but chronic decay, deepening crises, wars and catastrophe for mankind; that

the task before the working class was the task of destroying capitalism and establishing their own revolutionary dictatorship in order to build socialism with the minimum of delay and suffering; and that every phase and aspect of the working class struggle and every section of the working class army needed to be subordinated to this supreme aim. Had that understanding been shared by the whole working class movement two decades ago, had the lying deceptions of capitalist revival and reconstruction, stabilisation, Fordism, Mondism, organised capitalism, and inevitability of gradualness and all the rest of the infamous frauds and quackery to conceal the real decay been thrust aside, it would be a different situation to-day.

SECOND, they understood that the working class could only unite its ranks, conquer capitalism, win and maintain power, and construct socialism by means of and under the leadership of a centralised revolutionary political party of the working class, based on the theory of Marxism, drawing into its ranks all the most resolute, courageous and politically enlightened class-conscious workers, building and training the vanguard, rooted in the factories and in the mass organisations of the working class, linked with the mass movement and with all sections of the working people in every phase of the struggle, capable of defending the everyday interests of the working people and advancing to the defeat of capitalism and the final victory of socialism.

THEY understood that the question of building such a party is in the present epoch a life-and-death question for the labour movement. They understood that the old loose "trinity" of the sectional trade unions with their narrow economist outlook, of the federal Labour Party based on the trade unions and with its theoretical anarchy at the mercy of every capitalist influence, and of the co-operatives dominated by capitalist "business" conceptions, was incapable of standing up to the powerful centralised machine of modern monopoly capital and its State; and that all these sections of the working class could only realise their rôle and become part of an integrated working class movement through the leadership of a Marxist party of the working class able to draw together every section in a common aim and strategy. The whole history of these twenty years, of the Parliamentary Labour Party, of the two Labour Governments, of the betrayal of the General Strike, of the record of the General Council, of the economic and political defeats and strengthening of capitalist reaction, have proved the truth of this.

THIRD, they understood that the struggle of the working class is to-day in the fullest and most practical sense international: that "socialism in Europe has outlived that comparatively peaceful stage when it was confined within the narrow boundaries of nationality" (Lenin); that only the unity of the working class in all the capitalist countries together with the colonial peoples can defeat the power of imperialism; and that the party of the working class requires to be an international party, not a loose federal association of autonomous units tied to their different capitalist masters and flying asunder at the first touch of crisis, but a centralised international party under a single centralised leadership. The truth of this has been abundantly demonstrated through these twenty years, and is most powerfully demonstrated to-day in the present war. The phantom of a reconstructed Second International which

dragged along a tenuous ghostly existence during these two decades has not merely collapsed with the present war; it has gone right out of business, and lost even the show of a basis of organisation, now that the French partner has joined up with fascism (the entry of Belin, Assistant Secretary of the C.G.T., into the Pétain Government). The Communist International not only goes forward united and strong, and with increased strength, in the storm of the war. It is to-day the only international organisation in the world, with sections in every country and corner of the globe following a single leadership and a single policy: the sole unifying force of the human race and triumphant demonstration of working class internationalism in the midst of the chaos of world anarchy: the hope of mankind.

ALL these basic conceptions of the Communist Party have had to battle a long and steadily winning battle against the myriad deeply ingrained illusions, confusions and distortions of the old labour movement. All have been justified and vindicated by the whole history of these two decades. An enormous and now antiquated controversy followed the first foundation of the Communist Party. Revolution or gradual reform; working class dictatorship or evolutionary socialism; civil war or peaceful progress: these were the themes propounded by the pundits of the Labour Party and the Independent Labour Party, the MacDonaldis and Snowdens (whose second-rate progeny now occupy the seats of leadership of the Labour Party). With sanctimonious superiority the champions of capitalist influence in the labour movement, before finally joining up with the Conservative Party, denounced Communism and communist policy; they derided the revolutionary romanticism of the Communists, and proclaimed that the ebb of the revolutionary tide proved that revolution was an obsolete anachronism; they painted glowing pictures of the glorious future opening out before capitalism on the basis of the new technical advance and higher organised development; they demonstrated how capitalism was becoming daily more democratic and how all progress must be gradual; with odd reminiscences of student courses in biology they disproved Marxism; they inveighed against the horrors of bloodshed and civil war, and when Lenin warned the British workers to prepare for a perspective, not of easy parliamentary victories, but of heavy civil war, they licked their lips and felt that their case was proved and that in the eyes of all sober intelligent god-fearing citizens Communism was revealed as a nightmare.

TO-DAY these controversies are dead: capitalism itself has killed them. The authors of the "British school of socialism" went to their last home in the House of Lords and ended up as protagonists of a Tory Government imposing the Means Test on the workers in order to hold together the shattered fabric of capitalism in crisis. Their idyllic vision of the peaceful progress of democratic capitalism has vanished into limbo, as democracy has given place to fascism in country after country, and capitalism leads the world in the devil's dance of barbarism and mass murder. Who dares now paint the horrors of working class revolution, which could have long ago won peace and freedom for all peoples, when capitalism soaks the earth with the bloodshed of a new world war, and the sober intelligent God-fearing citizens scurry to their non-existent shelters from the rain of death of the bombing planes? Who dares now rattle the spectre of civil war when even the sorry apologists

of imperialist war seek to glorify their hideous holocaust for the profit of the millionaires with the lying appellation of an "international civil war"? In the wake of carnage the shadow of famine descends over Western Europe. Only in Eastern Europe Communism has brought peace, stability and abundance. The wheel has come full circle. The task of revolution was not avoided by evading it. It returns with all the greater insistence, the longer it is postponed. Every prophecy, prediction and warning of Communism has been fulfilled. In the midst of the storm of war and the break-up of the old capitalist order Communism comes into its own, and is revealed as the only path of freedom, peace and sanity for the world.

TO-DAY in consequence we draw the lessons of this anniversary, not in dwelling on the past, but in looking to the present and the future. All these twenty years have only been preparation for the greatest tasks and responsibilities that now fall to the working class and the Communist Party in this deepest crisis of the capitalist order which is tearing the world to pieces in the present war. Will the working class of Britain, of France, of Germany be ready and able in time to accomplish their task before the deepest abyss of destruction, misery and enslavement has been reached? Will they prevail to win the way from this war to the victory of the working class and socialism? This is the one question which matters to-day, which dominates every other. The answer to this question will only be determined in action. This we know: there is no other way out; every delay only brings greater suffering and makes more urgent and insistent the task. Every development of the crisis of capitalism makes more emphatic the need of a powerful Communist Party leading the mass movement as the vital need of the whole labour movement. We have already had to pay dear for the absence of such a mass Communist Party leading the labour movement in this country. It has already cost two wars; and this is not the end, till the lesson be learned. In the midst of the conditions of war we need more than ever to build up the strength of the Communist Party. We need to awaken the whole working class movement to independence and renewed struggle. Widely and still more widely our agitation on all the burning issues, great and small, which face the people to-day needs to reach out to all sections and build up the united movement of the people led by the working class. In the conditions of war, courageous struggle, initiative, limitless energy and sacrifice, confidence in the strength of the workers, the spirit that gives way before no obstacles—these are the conditions of victory. The Communists need to be able to guide the mass movement stage by stage, from the first beginnings of confused awakening and groping, to understand the feelings of the people, to express their real deepest aspirations against the lies and distortions of the official propaganda, to advance those slogans which carry forward the movement at the given stage of development, which awaken the consciousness of the people, tear down illusions, lay bare the gulf between the interests of the people and the ruling class, and build up the unity and solidarity of the working people to defend their own interests and advance to take their fate into their own hands. The unity of the mass movement and Communism—herein lies the urgent need of the labour movement, the one way forward, the solution of all the problems which to-day more than ever before carry with them the issues of life or death for the people.

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