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# The World Congress of the Communist International

[written circa Sept. 1, 1920] †

by John Reed

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Elipses in the original. Headers by the editor for this edition.

The 2nd World Congress of the Third International, just finished, was really its first congress — last year's meeting [March 2-6, 1919] was only a propaganda committee, with a handful of delegates. But more than that, the present congress was really the first gathering of actual revolutionary fighters ever held.

It was remarkable for the number of real proletarians, of actual workmen-fighters-strikers, barricade-defenders and of active leaders of the revolutionary nationalist movements in backward and colonial countries. German Spartacides, Spanish Syndicalists, American IWWs, Hungarian Soviet and Red Army leaders, British Shop Stewards and Clyde Workers' Committees, Dutch Transport Workers, Hindu, Korean, Chinese, and Persian insurrectionists, Irishmen-Sinn Feiners and Communist-Argentinian dockers, Australian "wobblies." All these people were not clear on Communism, they had violently divergent ideas about the dictatorship of the proletariat, parliamentarism, the need for a political party: but they were welcomed as brothers in revolution, as the best fighters of the working class, as comrades that were willing to die for the overthrow of Capitalism. And they left Moscow almost all convinced that a Communist Party was necessary, that only through the dictatorship of the proletariat could Communism be

reached, and that the Communist International was worthy to be the General Staff of the World Revolution...

"Life itself is with the Communist International," said Lenin. "We may make mistakes, but nevertheless all the revolutionists in the world must come to us, must join us..."



One year ago there were feeble Communist groups and tendencies in Europe and America, or parties undergoing severe internal struggles; now there are powerful Communist parties almost everywhere, or such parties are crystallizing with tremendous rapidity. There were delegates present from the Communist parties of the United States, England, Germany, Italy (Italian Socialist Party, which will change its name), Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Austria, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Ukraine, China, Korea, Turkey, Persia, Mexico, Iceland (where the Communist Party has a membership of 5,000 out of a population of 100,000), Sweden, Norway (the Norwegian Labor Party will change its name), Denmark, Dutch East Indies, Switzerland,

†- The 2nd World Congress of the Communist International was held in Moscow and Petrograd from July 19 to Aug. 7, 1920. Reed mentions this Congress as having "just finished" and the Congress of the Peoples of the East in Baku [Sept. 1-8, 1920] as "now taking place," which provides an estimated date of writing for this article. Reed died of typhus in Moscow on Oct. 17, 1920.

Spain, the International Socialist League of South Africa...

The irresistible magnetic force of the Congress destroyed what was left of the Second International, leaving for the Geneva Congress only the German Majority Social Democrats — whose delegate in the Bureau is Comrade *Noske* — the Branting Swedish Social Democrats, the Huysmans Belgian Party, the Austrian Woodrow Wilsonites, and the Polish Party headed by Gen. Pilsudski, who is now leading the war against Soviet Russia. As for the “Two and a Half” International, upon which were fastened the hopes of the French Socialists, the German Independents, the Swiss opportunists, and the Hillquitized Socialist Party of the United States, one puff of revolutionary scorn blew it out of existence.

The German Independents — Daumig, Crispian, Dittman, and Stocker — came hurrying to Moscow to dicker admission, knowing well that if they returned to Germany without an encouraging answer, the German masses would move out from under them... Cachin and Frossard of the French Socialist Party were also there, apologizing for their sins and the sins of their party. The American Socialist Party likewise sent a letter announcing its decision to adhere to the Communist International, accompanied by the Engdahl-Kruse resolution adopted by referendum, which caused considerable amusement here; while at the same time arrived the report of the May Convention of the Socialist Party [New York: May 8-14, 1920] with the Hillquit resolution adopted there, which contained the affiliation to the Third International, at the same time holding on to the “Two and a Half” International... As, however, the American Socialist Party representatives were arrested on suspicion of counterrevolutionary activities, and are held for deportation, the reply of the Communist International to this insolent request will be forwarded to America through other channels.

Millions of workers all over the world, of all races, speeches, and colors, now look to the Communist International, whose Executive Committee, seated at Moscow, will act as the staff of the ever developing world revolution, issuing orders to its different national sections. It is time that talks of “national autonomy” for the [affiliated?] <\*\*\*several words illegible\*\*\*> the Communist Party of each country is a military orga-

nization, a centralized and disciplined body of revolutionists, so the new International, unlike the Second International, is a centralized and disciplined army, the movement of each division of which must be strictly subordinated to the interest of the revolution as a whole.

This does not mean that the Communist International will take part in the details of the revolutionary struggle in each country, but that the International, through its Congress, lays down the broad lines of organization and tactics to be followed on a world scale, to be binding on all parties — and the Executive Committee decided immediate questions which spring up from time to time — such as splits within the Communist movement, questions of what to do in time of crisis, when the local party is in doubt, etc. it is the supreme governing body of the International, and its decisions are binding for all parties — which have, however, the right of appeal to the next World Congress.

### **Against the Opportunists.**

As a first step in the direction of centralization and discipline, the Congress has ruled that all parties must become centralized Communist parties; that they must clear out of their ranks, at any cost, the opportunists and reformists who still remain there; that they must have in executive positions only tried and proven Communists; and that they must make use both of legal and illegal organizations, and prepare the masses for civil war, for open insurrection.

To the German Independents and the French Socialists, and all the other semi-revolutionary parties whose opportunist leaders are now hurrying to get into the fold before the doors are shut, the Communist International says: “You are coming to us because the masses in your party are really revolutionary, really want to join us. But there are many non-revolutionary, even counterrevolutionary, elements in your party, many opportunists and compromisers and politicians. Before you can affiliate with the Communist International, your party must call a congress: this congress must adopt all the resolutions of the Congress of the International, must accept its rules of organization, its platform, must expel from its ranks all the politicians, all the opportunists — the Longuets, Thomases,

Renaudels (shall we add the Crispiens, Dittmans, the Cachins and Frossards?). You must publish all the communications of the Communist International, including those which denounce your leaders and the policy of your party. And when you have done all these things, when you have proved that your party is really a revolutionary Communist Party, not only by words, but also by revolutionary deeds — then we shall be glad to welcome you into the Communist International.

Needless to say, compliance with these decisions would almost entirely destroy the officialdom of the Socialist Party of the United States.

But towards its member-parties, the Communist International is even stricter. The Italian Socialist Party was told that it must expel Turrati, Treves, Modigliani & Co.; the Norwegian party was ordered to revise its method of organization, according to which whole Trade Unions, containing many members who are not Socialists, are organic members of the party; the German Communist Labor Party was denounced because of its attitude towards labor organizations, and its conception of the role and tactics of the party; and the Dutch Communist Pannekoek was rebuked for his theoretical conception of the role of the trade unions. Since the Congress, the Executive Committee has laid down the conditions for uniting of the English Communist movement, the American parties, the Czecho-Slovak movement, and the Swiss Communist groups and factions. These decisions are binding...

### **The National and Colonial Problem.**

One of the most interesting questions of the entire Congress was that of Nationalism and the Colonial problem. The committee in charge of this question was under the chairmanship of Lenin himself. It considered in detail and exhaustively the evolutionary and liberation movements in the Orient, in India, Egypt, Ireland, Persia, Turkey, the Caribbean Republics (destroyed by American imperialism), the Philippines; among the American Negroes, and the semi-colonial peoples of Central America, etc.

The theses of Lenin, advanced in his opening speech to the Congress upon the world situation and the tasks of the Communist International, was that one and a quarter billion out of the world population

of one and three-quarters billion people are now in the condition of dependent or subject peoples — one part because of their colonial situation, or that of being under protectorates or “mandates” — others as a result of the Treaty of Versailles, which places advanced and civilized countries, such as Germany and Austria, in the position as colonies, and still others because of their indebtedness to the two great capitalist solvent powers, England and America. In this condition are France, Italy, Belgium, and other countries.

The problem of subject peoples must become the main problem of history. And the problem of the subject people, because of the increased intensity of capitalist exploitation of the subject, colonial, and defeated countries, becomes a problem primarily of the exploited proletariat.

The division of opinion in the Commission was between those who believed primarily in the importance of the nationalist revolutionary movement, and those who believed that the Communist movement direct could be instigated in the backward countries. This latter was the opinion of many delegates from India and the Orient. In the end, it was laid down that it was the duty of the Communist International to aid both the communists and the “national revolutionary” movements — as distinguished from the bourgeois nationalist movement — in the backward colonial countries.

The interest taken in these revolutionary nationalist movements is emphasized by the opening of the great congress of Oriental peoples, which is now taking place in Baku, where 4,000 delegates of all the nations of the East are meeting on the seashore of the Caspian, planning the new Holy War of the Eastern proletarians for freedom.

The Congress of the International laid it down as a principle that it was possible to establish Soviets in the backward subject countries, that the ground was even very favorable for the Soviet System there, and that these countries might come to Communism without passing through capitalism. This marks an important step in advance in Socialist theory. It indicates the difference between the Second and Third Internationals, in the intellectual realism which dictates this conception, in the determination it shows to turn to action, to create the revolution in the East, and in this way, from the subject countries, to deal the most vital

blow at international capitalist imperialism from the stronghold of its power.

### **The Trade Union Question.**

The question which aroused the hottest discussion in the Congress was that of the labor unions.

It will be remembered that in its letter to the American Communist parties of last January [1920], the Executive Committee of the Communist International underlined the necessity of accelerating the break-up of the AF of L and supporting all tendencies toward revolutionary industrial unionism, by the Communists. At the Congress, however, the position was entirely reversed. The first proposition of the Executive Committee to the Congress, although it made an exception to the American movement, laid down the principle that it was necessary to revolutionize the unions by the Communists entering them and capturing the machinery and expelling the reactionary bureaucracy, thus making the unions the instrument of revolutionary action. Almost nothing was said about industrial unionism, which indeed nobody in Russia — or even on the continent of Europe, for that matter — seems to understand. It was emphasized, above all, that the Communist must not leave the trade unions, except for very limited reasons.

This attitude is the result of Radek's visit to Germany, where the Communist movement had split into two parties, one of which, the Communist Labor Party, disgusted with the reactionary character of the German trade unions, and despairing of capturing them for the revolution, advocated leaving them and forming new "general unions." The movement seems to have temporarily failed. Moreover, the German Communist Party, whose representative in the Congress admitted that they had for 9 months advocated the leaving of the unions, was now firmly convinced that the only possible way to capture the unions was to stay in them.

The American delegation, the IWW, the Shop Stewards, and the Industrialists and Syndicalists generally, pointed out the general character of the labor movement in the Anglo-Saxon countries, and even some continental countries, where the *form* of the unions was such that it could not be used for revolutionary purposes even if the Communists did capture

all the offices, a course of action which had been advocated and practiced for years by the Socialist Party of America. We agreed that it was foolish to leave the unions so long as the masses remained in them, and we also agreed that it was necessary to work in the craft unions, not to capture them, however, but to smash them, and to build industrial unions — both as fighting instruments and as the future organs for the administration of industry. We also demanded that the function of Workers' Committees and of Industrial Unions, which were narrowly limited according to Russian and German experience, be allowed some latitude, since in the western countries, especially in America, the theory of industrial unionism was very highly developed, as in England the Shop Steward movement.

The fundamental difference between us and the whole group of Europeans lay in the fact that in Europe the labor unions have for years been merely an appendage of the political party, and have been considered of secondary importance. This was nowhere more strikingly illustrated than in the statement by Radek that during the German Revolution, at the first constituent congress of the German Communist Party, the question of unionism was not even on the order of business. He pointed out that during these last 2 years the whole European revolutionary movement has been paying a great deal of attention to the unions, and now understand the important role they play — a role indicated by the part they played in the betrayal of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, and the part they have played during the Russian Revolution. We responded that for 25 years the question of unionism has been the most important question on the order of business of the revolutionary movements of America and England, and that in the theory of unionism the western countries are a decade ahead of Europe. The European delegates not only were unable to conceive of a trade union structure which could not be changed by a revolutionary majority — although they understand that the capitalist state cannot be so altered, cannot be made into a revolutionary instrument by the proletariat, but must be smashed — but they did not seem to realize to what extent this trade union apparatus had been developed in order to restrain and thwart the masses, or what a power in the working class the unions have become in some countries, and are be-

coming in others.

After a long and bitter fight, the Executive Committee made several amendments to their theses which, although far from satisfactory to the objecting delegates, still made it possible for Communists in America to work for revolutionary industrial unionism, and for the destruction of the reactionary American Federation of Labor. The Anglo-Saxons, however, (together with the Dutch, Spanish, Hindu, Irish, and part of the French delegation) presented their own amendment to the theses on unionism, which are incorporated in the report of the Convention.

The development of the revolution, which in the labor movement will be hastened by the foundation in Moscow of the Red Labor Union International, to destroy the Amsterdam Trade Union International — and upon the organization committee of which is a representative of the IWW and of the Shop Stewards — will surely bring about a radical alteration of the attitude of the Executive Committee of the Communist International, an attitude which is not even satisfactory to the Russian unions. At the next Congress, these theses must be altered. The Russian Comrades, even those responsible for the theses, admit that they have received a great deal of education upon the subject of unionism from the attitude of the Anglo-Saxon delegates.

### **The Party and Parliamentarism.**

The fights which were threatened upon the questions of the role of the Communist Party and Parliamentarism simmered down to a more or less unclear opposition from the Syndicalists and the industrialists, and from the “anti-parliamentary” wing of the Italian Communists — an entirely different position. The thesis of the Executive Committee, with some slight alterations, and with the addition of minority theses presented by Comrade Bordiga of Italy on the parliamentary question, were accepted by large majorities.

Of course there were various remnants of the sentiments of the Second International. On the National and Colonial Question, for example, the delegates of the British Socialist Party insisted upon the danger of “indiscriminate Communist agitation” in India, and informed the Congress very gravely that the British workers were so patriotic that an uprising

in India would draw the British masses away from the Socialist movement and to rush to arms for the defense of the Empire. Also Comrade Serrati of Italy objected to aiding the nationalist revolutionary movements in colonies, for very much the same reasons. This point of view was, however, severely rebuked by the members of the Congress.

Comrade Reed delivered a report, both in the committee and in the Congress, upon the Negroes in America and the revolutionary movement among them. It was decided by the Executive Committee to invite a commission of Negro revolutionists to come to Russia as guests of the Soviet Republic. This invitation will be forwarded through the Communist Party of America very soon.

The amended theses will be sent as soon as possible, and the stenographic report of the Congress is almost entirely translated, and is now being printed.

### **Congress a Unique Revolutionary Festival.**

The Congress was unique in world history. The stories of how the delegates reached Russia, across innumerable fronts, through unheard of dangers and hardships — one American IWW went around the world, and finally walked 500 miles across the desert mountains of Manchuria — are the most thrilling tales ever told. Many on their way here lost their lives, were shot, murdered; others were arrested, imprisoned, deported, and never reached here at all. Perhaps that is one reason why there were so many revolutionists at the Congress — because except for a very few who received legal passports, almost every delegate had to come illegally, in a revolutionary way, risking his life... Among them were no less than 6 American Communists of both parties, and 2 from the United Communist Party, and several IWWs. Now, as this is written, most of the delegates have started on their long way home, through the fronts, through the clouds of spies hanging over every frontier town...

Soviet Russia welcomed the delegates royally. As they came through the different towns, the population came out to meet them with banners and music, singing “The International.” The honor, the love, offered to the foreign delegates, the real respect and gratitude and affection shown by the workers and peasants, will never be forgotten. They were fed, clothed,

and given free access to the theatres, feasted and cheered. It is impossible in this article to describe the great demonstration at Petrograd, where the tremendous masses flowed like a clashing sea through the broad streets, almost overwhelming with their enthusiastic affection the delegates as they marched from the Tauride Palace to the Fields of Martyrs of the Revolution, protected on both sides by long lines of workers holding hands, forming a living chain; the vast throng on Uritsky Square, in front of the Winter Palace, where 70,000 people crowded, roaring, to greet the delegates; the pageant at night on the steps of the old Stock Exchange — now the Sailors' Club — where more than 5,000 people in gorgeous costumes took part, depicting the history of the proletarian revolution, from the Paris Commune to the International Revolution, and the cruisers of the Red Fleet, decked with flags, saluted with cannon the opening of the Congress, and the Red Army marched pass in review... Or the demonstration in Moscow, the procession of 300,000 people lasting all afternoon, the armed proletariat tramping by to salute the delegates, the trucks full of happy children, the interminable ranks of youthful proletarians enrolled in the Universal Military Training, the athletes, half-naked, beautifully tanned by the

sun — 25,000 of them — who afterwards drilled with flags on the vast field; the aeroplanes and dirigibles over the ancient city, where under the imperial old Kremlin wall, by the Brotherhood Grave of the revolutionary heroes, the delegates of the Congress stood watching the interminable file of workers' organizations and Red Army detachments go singing past...

### **Venues of the Congress.**

The first session of the Congress was held in Pritsky (Tauride) Palace, in compliment of the Red Capital. Then special trains transported the delegates to Moscow, where the other sessions took place in the great Vladimir Throne Room of the Imperial Palace in the Kremlin. Here were gathered together most of the revolutionists who fill the eye of the working masses of the world — from Russia, Lenin, Trotsky, Kamenev, Bukharin, Radek; from France, Rosmer, Sadoul, Lefebvre; from Germany, Levy and Meyer; from Italy, Serrati, Bombacci; from England, Sylvia Pankhurst, Jack Tanner, Willie Gallacher; from Austria, Toman, Gruber; from Hungary, Rakosi — and just after the Congress, Bela Kun.

*Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport.*

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