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# Ten Years

by C.M. O'Brien

Published in *The Proletarian* [Chicago], vol. 11, no. 5 (May 1928), pp. 3-5.

We are now *ten years old*. It was in May 1918 that *The Proletarian* first made its appearance. It was during the most reactionary period of the war. Working class periodicals were dropping out of existence, or were being suppressed by the patriotic warmongers.

*The Proletarian* was the first paper to make its appearance within the Socialist Party, representing a group which was aiming to win the rank and file to the support of the Bolshevik Revolution, and to carry the message of Marxism to the American workers. These facts made our periodical from the very first an opposition force within the Socialist Party. It frankly disagreed with the general theoretical position of the SP. We had been working for several years to gain a knowledge of scientific socialism and to propagandize from that standpoint. We assailed opportunism and confusion and had won considerable support for our viewpoint.

The objective of the Proletarian group was to win the membership of the Socialist Party to Marxism, or a large enough number to found a Marxian party. In November 1917, we hailed the Russian Bolshevik Revolution as "The Proletarian Revolution." Our medium of expression was *The Michigan Socialist*, which we controlled for a few months before it was killed by the Right Wing which opposed the Bolsheviks. The official position of the SP then, as now, was an opposition one. We were a small group. We stood practically alone in our support of the Russian Revolution. The membership in general, apart from the leaders, were uncertain which way to turn. They could not comprehend the trend of events in Russia.

During the first year of our existence something happened which we were not counting upon. A tremendous sentiment for the Russian Revolution swept through the ranks of the Socialist Party. The membership in general were swept clean off their feet with a hothouse "Left Wing" development.

*The Proletarian*, which at first had bent all its energies to win the membership of the SP away from its sloppy sentimental conceptions of socialism, now found itself confronted with a wild and unthinking surge to the "Left."

This magazine was but six months old when there appeared in the eastern part of the country a weekly paper which proclaimed an all-saving new tactics for the working class. Mass Action was the new shortcut to the social revolution. *The Revolutionary Age* (someone called it "The Revolutionary Rage") was edited by Louis C. Fraina. He wielded a red-hot pen. Slow, painstaking education in Marxism was out of the question. The election of representatives to bourgeois parliaments was reactionary and too slow in any case. There was no time to prepare, no time to build a well informed and disciplined party of the proletariat, but revolution was at hand, "just around the corner." **But**, mass action would turn the trick on the bourgeoisie. The masses were going to rise in their might (informed leaders, not necessary at all, just a few men of courage) and sweep the powerful American capitalism into the discard.

The membership of the SP, many former reformist leaders included, swallowed Fraina's revolutionary formula completely. The substance of the propaganda of *The Revolutionary Age* was approximately as follows: "The old methods of the Social Democrats have proven to be a complete failure. Parliamentarism and the old trade unions must be abandoned. In place of efforts to win a majority at the polls we must substitute the 'revolutionary upsurge of the mass.' Mass Action is the way out. In place of the old conservative trade unions we must have new revolutionary industrial unions. The first step is to destroy the AF of L and build up the IWW to take its place. We do not have to wait until the working class is ready, but just a vanguard

that is militant enough, then, by a sudden onslaught, we will overthrow capitalism and establish communism.”

This picture of a “Mass Action” revolution carried the SP membership off its feet. A “Left Wing” grew to thousands of members within a few months. Enthusiasm was at boiling point, understanding almost zero. In an early issue of *The Proletarian* we warned against it as follows:

As one looks over the different manifestos which have recently been issued, the thought arises that there is a danger that the Left Wing tendency now developing may swing to the other side of the arc and become as reactionary in one direction as the Right in the other. Space does not permit a detailed analysis of the various manifestos, yet a general tendency may be noted. All seem to be predicated upon the idea that the revolution is just around the corner.

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It would be a great calamity if we were to reject opportunism only to turn to the other extreme of reaction. This can be prevented if study classes are started in all Locals so that the membership may have opportunity to become informed on the fundamentals of socialism.

What we feared came to pass. The Left Wing lost its balance completely. It took on a wilder and more irresponsible character than we ever dreamed possible. Our warning, while it brought many to our point of view (which was, that we were not heading for a revolution but were entering a period where prolonged and painstaking preparation and training was necessary), for the most part was met by a sneer. The leaders of the Left Wing, Fraina, Ferguson, Larkin, Gitlow, Wolfe, Ballam (Ruthenberg was not then committed to the Left Wing movement), and others jeered at the idea of Marxist education. It was too slow. The time for theorizing was passed. The time for action was here. An “Infantile Leftism,” as Lenin later termed the disease, pervaded the ranks of the Left Wing movement. The American brand of it was extremely “infantile.” Yet it was our fate to have to travel with, and combat from short range, those revolutionary inebriates.

When the Socialist Party National Executive Committee expelled the Socialist Party of Michigan from the national body

and suspended some of the Language Federations because we were supporting the Russian Bolshevik Revolution, it was necessary to act. An Emergency Convention was held in the state of Michigan. In our issue of July 1919 we reported:

The expulsion of the Socialist Party of Michigan from the SP of A by the National Executive Committee forced upon the State Executive Committee the necessity of calling immediately a State Emergency Convention. Consequently, on Saturday morning, June 15th [1919], the Convention was called to order by the State Secretary, John Keracher, in the House of the Masses,, Detroit Mich.

Continuing, this report says:

The chief work of the Convention, around which most of the discussions revolved, was the adoption of a call for a national convention at Chicago, Illinois, on September 1st, for the purpose of organizing a new Socialist Party. A draft of the call was submitted to the Convention and, as it was taken up clause by clause, much discussion ensued. The chief aspects of the discussion pertained to the question of parliamentarism. Many of the delegates were anxious to see that it did not savor of pure and simple parliamentary action; while others were anxious to see that it did not fall into the other form of reaction by taking an anti-parliamentary position.

Upon the adoption of the Call, a motion was made that the Committee on Ways and Means be instructed not to circulate the same until the Left Wing Conference, meeting in New York a week hence,, be given an opportunity to act upon the Call.

The Left Wing Conference, brought into being mainly through the propaganda of the Mass Actionists and their periodical, *The Revolutionary Age*, was quite representative of all who were in disagreement with the official policy of the Socialist Party of America. It decided not to organize a new party but to stay within the SP and capture it for their "Mass Action Socialism."

*The Proletarian*, as a magazine which expressed the viewpoint of a group, took the stand that the SP leaders would not permit their party machinery to be taken over. That was just what happened. The official Left Wing was expelled from the

Socialist Party Convention Hall two days before the date we had set for the organizing of a new party, September 1st, 1919.

When the Left Wing Conference in New York City in June 1919 adopted a "Left-sick" program, a mish-mash of Anarchism, Socialism, and Syndicalism, we found ourselves a minority disagreeing with its crudities. However much we might have admired the enthusiasm and spirit that brought it forth, we could not close our eyes to the mass of confusion it contained and muddled headed character of the Conference of which it was a product. We were overwhelmed with confusionists and after several days prepared to withdraw and go on with our original plans as instructed by the Michigan Convention. The delegates of the Russian Federation and some other language-speaking groups were withdrawing also. They did not disagree with the muddled program but they repudiated the idea of trying to continue in the SP, from which they were suspended. We united with the Russian Federationists and issued a call for a Communist Convention. It was the first and only call that has ever been issued in this country for the formation of a Communist Party. The names of some foreign-born workers and some members of the Proletarian group appeared thereon. John Keracher is probably the only one still active in the revolutionary movement here whose name appeared upon the original Call. We were still a minority in the minority of the Left Wing Conference. Our associates had the Mass Action, anti-AF of L, anti-parliament, pro-syndicalist viewpoint. We struggle to prevent the launching of a "Communist Party" of confusion, and the inauguration of a suicidal policy. We were overwhelmed.

At the Communist Party Convention, Chicago, Sept. 1, 1919, a program was drawn up, not so fantastic as the Left Wing Manifestos, but still one in which we found ourselves in much disagreement. We had presented a Communist program. It was rejected for a Mass Action, confusionist program. We expressed our disapproval. Two months later, without any warning or notice of any kind, the National Executives of the Communist Party expelled all those who adhered to the view and activities of the Proletarian group. The following month, December

(1919) the American government swooped down on all “Red organizations.” For several months arrests were the order of the day. It was several months before we were able to devote time to a consideration of our position.

The Communist Party had disappeared, theoretically at least. It had gone “underground.” We continued to work actively in the open and in June 1920 the adherent of the Proletarian group organized the *Proletarian Party* of America. Since 1920, *The Proletarian* has been the official organ of the Party. It has given expression to the theoretical position of the Proletarian Party, not only in a general way, but in relation of the other parties claiming to represent the working class, and in relation to the objective conditions of the class struggle in the USA.

The Proletarian has weathered a stormy ten years. Looking back, the time seems short, but we have crowded much activity into that period and gained much real experience. This magazine is now the mouthpiece of a well established Party. It reflects the maturing process that is going on in its ranks. It carries a message that is an inspiration to larger and larger numbers of workers. Each year sees its influence grow. The ten years gone by can not be fully reviewed in this short article but it has been a most interesting decade, one in which The Proletarian has played no mean part in the development of the necessary Marxian knowledge that the vanguard of the proletariat must possess ere the masses of toilers can be awakened to their historic task, the destruction of wage-slavery and the ushering in of the Communist society.

*Edited by Tim Davenport*

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