LENIN AND THE YOUTH

By WILL HERBERG.

"Upon the. . . youth organizations falls the gigantic task of struggling for revolutionary internationalism, for true socialism, against the dominant opportunism that has gone over to the side of the bourgeoisie."

IN this revolutionary call to the youth uttered by Lenin in the darkest days of the war we have the key to his conception of the role of the revolutionary youth in the class struggle the proletarian revolution. In the youth Lenin saw the bearers of the uncompromising struggle for true socialism, of the war to the end against the cancerous opportunism that had eaten into the very vitals of the international proletarian movement.

Why Did Lenin Turn to the Youth?

Why did Lenin thus turn to the youth? Was it for sentimental reasons, or was it because Lenin wished to set off the youth against the adults? Nothing of the kind! And it is in Lenin's analysis of the position and the role of the proletarian youth in capitalist society that we find ample evidence of the profound Marxist understanding and astounding ability to probe with a few deft strokes to the very depth of things that have made Lenin, beside Marx, the greatest leader the oppressed and exploited of the earth have ever had.

The Economic Sources of Opportunism.

The revolutionary sprit and the indomitable enthusiasm of the youth Lenin saw as the direct consequence of the effects of imperialism upon the working class, as the obverse of the opportunist rottenness and reformism that characterized the dominant social-democracy. Lenin analyzed very thoroly what Marx and Engels had suggested more than once—the influence of the development of imperialism upon the various tendencies in the working class movement. He showed how a certain portion of the immense super-profits wrung by finance-capital from the masses of the toilers and from the "backward" peoples of the colonies thru the most merciless exploitation is used, in a great variety of ways, to corrupt a section of the working class of the home country and to raise that section to the position of an "aristocracy of labor." Insofar, therefore, as this skilled "labor aristocracy" profits from the few crumbs falling off the imperialist table, there tend to develop certain economic ties binding them to the imperialist bourgeoisie and giving them a certain interest in the maintenance of imperialism.

What can be the political reflex of this situation? What but a growing opportunism, a cancerous reformism that began to penetrate and spread thruout the whole of the labor movement. And the social-democratic party and the trade union bureaucracy—representatives of the labor aristocracy—began to reflect more and more clearly, in a hidden or open manner, the devastating corruption which imperialism was producing in the upper strata of the proletariat.

The Youth Remains Revolutionary.

The youth, however, was largely untouched by this cancerous corruption of opportunism. The youthful proletariat has no skilled aristocracy feeding on the crumbs from the imperialist feast. The laboring youth is almost exclusively unskilled and subject to the severest exploitation and oppression. Upon the youth, likewise, falls the full weight of the crushing militarism that characterizes the imperialist nation. It is the youth that forms the conscript armies sent to slaughter for the greater glory of finance-capital. It is the laboring youth in short that finds its lot the hardest of any section of the laboring masses.

In the youth therefore, untouched by imperialist corruption, as Lenin showed, opportunism can find no lodgement. In the youth reformist illusion can find no welcome. The youth has no long-standing opportunist traditions. The fiery enthusiasm of the toiling youth can not be dampended by the debilitating rottenness that succeeded in turning the whole structure of social democracy into a "whited sepulchre." The proletarian youth will stand firm for the revolutionary class struggle! The revolutionary youth bears death and destruction for the opportunist agents of the bourgeoisie!

That is why Lenin turned to the youth. Liebknecht had done this also and for identical reasons. But Liebknecht had "gone to the youth" blindly, one might say, without understanding the why and the wherefore. It was Lenin that laid bare the hidden social forces that contributed in raising the advanced proletarian youth as the bearers of uncompromising class struggle.

The Collapse of the Social-Democracy at the Outbreak of War.

It was the war, above everything else, that proved in the most striking fashion the correctness of Lenin's analysis. What Lenin had foretold happened! The official social-democracy turned over to the military general staffs its whole organization which had a hold, ideologically and organizally, upon millions of workers. Social-democratic leaders fairly gloried in falling over each other to betray the workers and to send them into the armies of imperialism. One way or the other, either the open social chauvinism of scheidemann or the hypocritictl centrist social-pacifism of Kautsky—all ended in the same thing—betrayal, treason, corruption.

The Youth Fights for Internationalism

In the small band of fighters who remained true to the cause of the proletarian struggle, the leading elements of the Socialist Youth International stood in the front rank. Lenin maintained the closest ideological and organizational contact with these youth organizations and was personally instrumental in helping to organize the Young Communist International—the world League of Communist Youth the vanguard of the toiling youth of the world.

Lenin and the Errors of the Youth.

Lenin devoted his very greatest care and attention to the liquidation of the theoretical mistakes and unclarities that naturally characterized the first attempts of the proletarian youth in their role as vindicators of true Marxism and Internationalism. And the remarkable tact and consideration with which the errors of the youth were criticized by this man, known the world over as the most "bitter" and most uncompromising controversialist, proves the significance Lenin saw in the movement of the proletarian youth.

Lenin and the Russian Youth League.

The profound ferment produced by the Russian revolution in 1917 crystallized all over Russian revolutionary circles of proletarian and student youth. Lenin was quick to see the significance of this movement and lent it his best support. It was he also who was most influential in developing this movement and finally in organizing it as a Young Communist League, an organizationally independent but politically subordinate organization and not, as some comrades wished to make it, simply a department of the Communist Party. Indeed, Lenin had always maintained most vigorously the position of the organizational independence of the youth since, as he proved, only on such a basis can the youth movement develop in the proper direction and attain its objectives.

One could go on forever citing examples of Lenin's profound understanding of the role and significance of the movement of the revolutionary youth. To the toiling youth of the world, suffering under the most severe exploitation and oppression, Lenin stands forth as the leader, as one who understood better and appreciated more than anyone else their miseries and their strivings. In Leninism the toiling youth of the world sees the road to its emancipation! In Leninism, as embodied in the Young Communist International, it sees its leader in the struggle for freedom!



The serpent of capitalist imperialism tries to sneak his way into the labor movement. The shams, the cant, and the platitudes of imperialist ideology successfully poison a large part of the labor movement. But the youth of the working class can overcome this poison.

The Dentist Will Get His Fingers Bitten



The labor faker in the service of the boss wants to pull the teeth of the labor movement. By getting the reds—the militant members—out of the unions, he would make the unions toothless and harmless servants to the employers. But experience shows that in this case the patient bites the fingers of the faker dentist and will not have his teeth pulled.