Problems of the Crisis

The Crisis and Revolution

by Will Herberg

The problem of the revolutionary implications of the economic crisis is probably the most fundamental question in the world Communist movement today. It is the basic strategical question facing the revolutionary vanguard of the proletariat. A false approach to this problem and an equally false solution is certainly the source of the false tactical line of the Communist International to-day that has spread such havoc and ruin in all sections of the C.I. The sharpening of the world economic crisis in recent months was sure to bring this question to the fore and a lively discussion, even tho inadequate and confused, is now in progress thruout the International; in a distorted and bureaucratic form this discussion is mirrored in a series of recent articles in the *Communist International*, the central organ of the Executive Committee of the Communist International. But the results of this discussion are surely unsatisfactory, for the whole discussion is being conducted within the strict bounds of the sacred ultra-left prejudices and any challenge to these prejudices is altogether out of the question. A general consideration of the problems involved, even tho in a merely *tentative* manner, would certainly be in place.

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The Real Question

The real question, it appears to me, is this: Under what conditions does an *economic crisis* turn into a *political crisis?* And then: What is the relation of the political crisis to the development of a *revolutionary situation?*

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Lenin clearly defined an *all-national (general) political crisis* by the following two main characteristics: "(1) It is impossible for the ruling classes to maintain their power unchanged (the 'governing classes' cannot govern as of old); there is a crisis 'higher up' taking one form after another; there is a crisis in the policy of the ruling class. . . ." (2) "The masses do not want the old regime"

For this all-national crisis to turn into a *revolutionary situation* (i.e., a situation in which a revolution is objectively possible), a *third* condition is necessary: "(3) There is considerable increase in the activity of the masses, who in 'peace' times allow themselves to be robbed without protest, but in stormy times are drawn, both (by the circumstances of the crisis and also by the 'higher-ups' themselves, into independent historic action." *Finally*, for a revolution to *emerge* out of a revolutionary situation the decisive factor is: "(4) The ability of the revolutionary class to carry out revolutionary mass action strong enough to overthrow (or undermine) the old government . . ."

Nothing more could be desired from the point of view of clarity.

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The View of the Comintern

But the real problem is: *Under what circumstances do the conditions making for the transformation of one of the phases into another and higher stage develop?* How startlingly simple was the answer of the Comintern in the heyday of its ultra-leftism? An economic crisis just "naturally" (automatically) turns into an all-national crisis, which in turn passes over into a revolutionary situation, and then—the revolution! We can still recall the phantasies of the "oncoming revolutionary wave" of the Tenth Plenum era, of the "proletarian revolution standing as the immediate prospect in a whole series of countries".

Such a viewpoint is a travesty on the principles of Leninism! Already Engels pointed out, in his famous introduction to Marx's *Class Struggles in France*, that there is no *inevitable* and *necessary* connection between an economic crisis (however deep!) and a maturing revolutionary situation. The relation is far more involved, much more many-sided. In his vigorous polemic against the ultra-left at the Third Congress of the Communist International (1921) the main reporter for the E.C.C.I. made it abundantly clear that a period of economic crisis may be accompanied by a depression in the labor movement while, on the other hand, a period of "prosperity" may be marked by a rise of the revolutionary wave.

> "There does not exist any such general automatic connection between the revolutionary movement of the working class and the crisis. There is no automatic connection; there is a dialectic interaction.
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> "Let us examine the conditions in Russia. . . . In the fall of the year 1907 there was a tremendous world crisis. . . In the years 1907, 1908, 1909 the most frightful crisis dominated Russia. But the movement in Russia was completely paralyzed thru the crisis . . . In the years 1910, 1911, 1912 there was an improvement in the economic situation and then prosperity . . . And the workers went over to economic and political offensive . . . ."

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Varga and Martynoff Chime In

Such barren "simplicity" as marks the present CI viewpoint is the essence of sectarianism; it particularly charactized the ultra-left spree of 1929-1930. Then came the morning-after of the "new turn". We began to hear talk of "heterogeneity", of "uneven maturing of the crisis", of "varying lines of development"—but all as *secondary deviations from the fundamental ultra-left premises* which remained and still remain intact. It is in the spirit of this "new turn" that Comrades Varga and Martynoff approach the big question of the laws of revolutionary development in their articles in the *Communist International.*

Varga's article (*C.I.* Vol. viii, No. 1) presents some very interesting economic material and is well worth studying. The fundamental trouble with Varga's argument, however, is his obstinate insistence upon forcing his facts into a theoretical scheme which allows only one direction and only one form of development in a situation that bristles with diversity and demands the greatest flexibility of analysis. Thus Varga finds that in Germany, for example, the growing inability of the bourgeoisie to rule "as usual" is marked by the "decomposition, splitting and new formation of political parties"; therefore in the United States this *must* also be the case and the proof is: "In America we see the election victory of the Democrats, crisis in the Republican Party, etc." ! ! ! !

Martynoff's article (*C.I.*, Vol. viii, Nos. 3-4) shows exactly the same crucial deficiency, altho Martynoff does make some pretense at a specific analysis of various groups of countries but—the conclusion, after all, is that they are all developing *along the same road, in the same direction, thru the same phases*, etc. The specific analysis thereupon becomes merely a gesture, an empty compliment paid to the Leninist method. The old ultra-left premises and the old ultra-left conclusions remains untouched in essence.

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The Actual Situation Today

What is actually the situation today? The whole capitalist world is in the throes of a deep economic crisis, which, however, manifests itself in a specific form, assumes a specific significance, and leads to specific social-political developments in accordance with the specific position of each country in the structure of world economy. For this reason the transformation of the economic crisis into an all-national political crisis has *begun* in some countries while in others *no signs* of any such beginning are now visible—and in those countries where the process has begun it takes various forms. In "democratic" Germany, for example, as well as in Fascist Poland, there can be no question that the two conditions for the maturing of an all-national crisis are rapidly appearing: "The masses do not want the old regime and the rulers are unable to govern them as of old. . ." In Germany even the prerequisite for the development of the all-national political crisis into a revolutionary situation is present: A tremendous increase in the political activity of the masses is *beginning* to appear. In India, all three conditions have existed for some time and probably still exist, altho a certain depression has recently set in. In Spain today, under very special conditions, the three conditions are making a very clear appearance. But in other countries there are not even signs of the development of a general political crisis and certainly no evidence whatever of the maturing of a revolutionary situation. In neither the United States nor France is it possible to speak seriously of "the inability of the bourgeoisie to rule as usual" (the *first* conditions for all-national political crisis); in England some signs are visible perhaps but only in the very first stages. To speak of a revolutionary situation in any of these countries is absurd.

But even in those countries where a revolutionary situation may be said to be maturing (Germany), the *absolutely necessary* condition for the outbreak of proletarian revolution is

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Problems of the Indian Revolution

A REVOLUTIONARY PARTY FOR INDIA

M. N. Roy to the "Swatantra Bharat Sabha"

Dear Comrades,

Let me congratulate you for having indicated the right way to the numerous rank and file Congressmen (adherents of the All-India National Congress-*Editor*) eager for an effective struggle for freedom. The prompt suppression of your new-born organization (the *Swatantra Bharat Sabha*) is the proof that you are on the right road. The fact also proves that the journey on the road you have selected will not to an easy one. It requires courage of conviction, revolutionary determination and above all collective effort.

The *Swatantra Bharat Sabha* did not propose to act as an independent political party. It wanted to function as an organized group inside the Congress with the purpose of having the latter eventually adopt a revolutionary program. The move was tactically correct at the moment it was made. The situation has changed since then. Now to be an integral part of the Congres organization does not provide the revolutionary elements with field for legal activity. The Congress itself has been declared an illegal body. Besides, you could never have the illusion that the Congress as a whole organization would ever endorse a revolutionary program as advocated by you. Your purpose evidently is to remain in close contact with the Congress rank and file with a view to win these over to your position. This is a very correct attitude. Having a very distinct program, your group, nevertheless, from the very beginning represented the tendency towards an independent political party, objective conditions for the rise of which are mature, and upon the rise of which further development of the national revolutionary struggle depends. An independent party with its own program can still support and cooperate with all other organizations actually conducting a struggle against imperialism.

The program of your group is not only the program of national revolution. It also indicates the way to the struggle for a greater social revolution. This being the case, historically, your group provides the platform for all the revolutionary elements to be welded eventually into a powerful party of the working class. Rapid development of the situation and future perspectives demand that the latent tendency of your group should be given a clear form. Your group should without delay take up the very urgent task of a mass party of the Indian workers and peasants.

Forces objectively making for and even consciously advocating Socialist reconstruction of the Indian society, have been steadily growing in the country of late. But very few of them have as yet been organized in a party without which no struggle for political power and social reconstruction is ever pissible. *A revolutionary party of the working class is a historic as well as immediate necessity.* Given correct program, and with methods of organization suitable to the conditions of the country, it is bound to grow rapidly into a powerful political factor.

Comrades: It is hardly necessary for me to tell you that the program you advocate is a program of social revolution. National freedom will be only a stage in that revolution. The social revolution will overthrow the parasitic exploiting class from power and make the producing masses collective owners of everything produced by their collective labor. Consequently, the army fighting the numerous battles of this revolution must be, in the first place, recruited from the working classes. The party advocating and striving for the overthrow of the present capitalist society is the revolutionary vanguard of the working class. Some of the pioneers of the party, as many of ourselves, may not be actually born in the working class (altho most of them are intellectual workers) but they become the pioneers of social revolution by ideologically disassociating themselves from the exploiting classes and identifying themselves with the proletariat.

There can be no party of the working class earnestly striving for a social revolution in the interests of the producing masses except with the revolutionary determination that grows out of firm conviction. There is no use having a noble ideal unless one is determined to reach it at all cost. A great idea is of little practical value unless one struggles for triumph. In a certain period of history a particular social class assumes revolutionary character being antagonistic to the dying old and therefore the harbinger of the rising new. But the entire class cannot possibly take active part in the actual struggle. Only the most advanced of it, together with those who desert the doomed old to fight for the nascent new, do the actual revolutionary fighting. Therefore, the advance-guard, organized in the revolutionary party, becomes the organ thru which the energy of the entire class is brought to bear upon the situation. That means, every single moment in the life of a member of the revolutionary party must be devoted to the cause of the revolution. Every other form of activity should be secondary. The paramount obligation is to the party. The party must have the first claim upon the very being of its members. These should work for the party, live for the party, die for the party. Only such a party can make a revolution, and we need such a party in India.

Comrades: As a loosely formed group you can make no more progress. Pioneers of a revolutionary class, striving for a great social revolution, must organize themselves into a powerful political party. It is hardly to be expected that a revolu-

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Most economists are now agreed that the recent talk of revival is unfounded and that tangible evidence of expanding activities is not generally visible. The loudest optimists are now shifting their revival prophecies to the Spring. Some look to next winter. The A. F. of L. survey admits that "unemployment will last on at nearly its present level for several months and will be a serious problem for the rest of the year." The farmer's income has already fallen by over 20%.

The downward price trend contin-

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unfortunately missing: "the ability of the revolutionary class to carry out revolutionary mass action strong enough to overthrow the old government. . ." This "subjective" factor is to a large extent dependent upon how successfully the political party of the proletariat fulfills its role as revolutionary vanguard. Under the inspiration of the present un-Leninist course of the Comintern, however, the Communist Party of Germany is rapidly losing its vital contacts with the organizations of the masses and its fighting leadership over them without which its leading role is merely a phrase. To a great extent for this reason the tremendous increase in the political activity of the masses is manifested in a *sensational swing to Fascism*, to the extreme right. Disillusioned with "things as they are" (typified by the "moderate" bourgeois parties and Social-democracy) the masses go *not* to Communism but to the hopelessness and despair of Fascism. Such is the living reality—quite different from the verbal concoctions of Varga or Martynoff.

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And In the United States

In some countries (the United States, for example) it is impossible to speak of a tremendous increase (or any real increase at all!) of the class action of the masses; the *basis* for a radical development however, for a general leftward movement, exists and sporadic manifestations appear from time to time. And yet, by and large, the severe economic crisis here is accompanied by an unexampled *passivity* of the masses and an absence of any rise in the labor movement or any sharp swing to the left (unexampled when compared with the activity of labor in previous crises periods). The inactivity of the labor movement in the face of the most acute unemployment yet seen is something every Communist should ponder.

What is the reason for the general passivity of labor in the United States in this period of economic crisis? It cannot *merely* be explained by the monumental treachery of the official labor leaders or by the self-annihilation of Communist influence among the masses; a deeper and more objective reasons seems to be required. In his autobiography Trotsky ventures an explanation which deserves serious consideration. He says:

> "After a period of big battles and defeats, a crisis has the effect of depressing rather than arousing the working class. It undermines the workers confidence in their power and demoralizes them politically. Under such conditions only an industrial revival can close the ranks of the proletariat, pour fresh blood into its veins, restore its confidence in itself and make it capable of further struggle."

Whatever may be the objective factors at work, however, it is clear that the new tactics and methods of the capitalists and the completely procapitalist policy of the A. F. of L. officialdom, which stifles every move of protest and unrest in the unions even before it manifestes itself, have been very important secondary factors in preventing the potentialities from becoming realities. At the same time, the policy of self-isolation and self-discrediting of the Communist Party of the United States under its ultra-left course has certainly hindered very greatly the inevitable process of the breaking away of important strata of workers from the influence of the reactionary labor officialdom. All of these factors are thoroly interwined.

It has not been my purpose to present any definitive theory as to the relations between economic crisis, general political crisis and revolutionary situation. All I have attempted to do is to show the shallowness of the "simple" ultra-left schemes so popular in the Comintern today and to call attention to the *real* complexity of the *real* problems facing us. A discussion of these questions in the ranks of the Communist Opposition (the only place a real discussion can take place today!) would certainly be very useful from the viewpoint of the ideological maturing of the world Communist movement.