

# The Socialism of the Hopeless\*

HAIM KANTOROVITCH

## I.

THE Socialist movement throughout the world is restless. Everywhere, the feeling is growing that the socialist movement cannot, after the tragic experiences in Germany, and now in Austria, remain "just as it was". The years of revolution and counter-revolution, the advent of fascism, have left their mark on the socialist movement. The number of socialist voices demanding a revision of socialist tactics, a restatement of socialist principles is continually growing. Reformism, which reigned supreme until the German debacle is slowly, but steadily, yielding to revolutionary socialism. Even the German Social Democratic Party, the party of arch-reformism, has now abandoned reformism and its former democratic illusions, and has adopted a left revolutionary program.

The new program of the German Social Democratic Party declares frankly that "the great historical error committed by the German labor movement, which lost its sense of direction during the war" was that "it took over control of the state . . . sharing it, as a matter of course, with the bourgeois parties." The German Social Democratic Party promises, in its new program, that when it gets state control again it will organize "a strong revolutionary government based upon, and controlled by, a revolutionary mass party of the workers." "The first and most important task of such a government," the program continues, "will be to use the power of the state to make the victory of the revolution safe, to root out any possibility of resistance." It will undertake at once a series of revolutionary changes of society. Among these will be the "suppression of all counter-revolutionary agitation"; "immediate expropriation, without compensation, of large landed estates"; "immediate expropriation, without compensation, of

---

\* "Socialism, Fascism, Communism", edited by Joseph Shaplen and David Shub. Published by the American League for Democratic Socialism, New York, 1934. Price \$1.50.

## The American Socialist Quarterly

the heavy industries", etc.

But, what about freedom and democracy? The German Social Democratic Party has learned something from the tragic experiences through which it has gone; it has learned that the business of a socialist party is to fight for Socialism. Once Socialism is established democracy is safe and assured. The new program declares:

"only after the authority of the revolution has been firmly established and the feudal-capitalist and political sources of power of the counter-revolution have been completely destroyed, will the process of building up the new organization of the state on the basis of freedom be begun, by the convening of a national assembly, elected by universal, equal, direct and secret suffrage . . ."

In other words the German Social Democratic Party proposes to postpone the re-establishment of democracy until Socialism will be safe from all counter-revolutionary resistance. And what will be the form of government during this transition period? The program does not name it, but political science has only one name for it: Dictatorship. If one does not like this word, he may call it whatever he pleases. Nothing will be changed by changing one word for another.

The new program shows that the left tendency in the Socialist International has taken deep root also in the German Social Democratic Party. The cry "back to revolutionary socialism!" is growing everywhere, Germany not excepted.

### II.

The forces of reformism are decreasing everywhere, but reformism certainly is not dead and will not be dead for a long time to come. It still is in a formidable majority in the international socialist movement. But, it has become apprehensive; it has begun to realize that it is nearing its end. The bankruptcy of reformism in Germany is so complete, that no amount of "explanation" by Karl Kautsky can hide the fact any longer. This explains why the reformists suddenly became active and articulate, not only in Europe, but also in America, where its main characteristic has been self-contented inactivity. The result of their sudden "com-

## The Socialism of the Hopeless

ing to life" is a volume of 239 pages, called "Socialism, Fascism, Communism", edited by Joseph Shaplen and David Shub, inspired by, and introduced with, the blessings of, Comrade Abraham Cahan. In the "Foreword", the editors declare that "the purpose of this book is to present a point of view" on burning questions of international socialism and labor which has not had adequate representation in America. It is the point of view of social democracy as distinct from communist, quasi-communist and liberal points of view." This statement is utterly incorrect. This "point of view" has constantly been presented in most of the socialist papers in America. As a matter of fact, the bulk of the book consists of articles published in the "Jewish Daily Forward" which, though a foreign language paper, nevertheless moulds, to a very large extent, the public opinion in the American party. Utterly incorrect is the statement that this is the "Social Democratic point of view", unless the "League for Democratic Socialism" (which consists of less than a dozen people), believes itself to be the only social democratic party in the world. The Social Democratic Party of Germany has spurned this point of view in its new program. The French Socialist Party certainly does not share this point of view. As a matter of fact most of the contributors to the present volume do not like the French Socialist Party; it is too left for them. Instead, they tend to support the Neo-Socialist group of extreme right reformist-nationalists that have under the leadership of Renaudel, split away from the French Party. The Russian Social Democratic Party does not accept this point of view; the Social Democratic Bund of Poland does not accept the point of view; nor does the Social Democratic Party of Austria accept the point of view. What right then have these comrades to declare that "their" point of view is the social democratic point of view? The volume under consideration represents the point of view of a very small and continually diminishing group in the socialist movement that were so scared by the Bolshevik revolution in Russia that they would rather have no Socialism than anything resembling Communism.

## The American Socialist Quarterly

The weakest contribution to the volume is "American Socialism at the Crossroads" by Joseph Shaplen. This is the only article in the book dealing with the American movement. Of 239 pages, twenty-three are devoted to the American movement, and these twenty-three pages consist of complaints that the American Socialist Party, for a number of years, "compromised" itself and "surrendered to Lenin outright or went in for compromise with Leninism." The main complaint however is that the American Socialist Party has neglected to develop "a specific school of American socialist thought and an American socialist method in harmony with American reality. It has relied for the most part upon old orthodox European formulae." To counteract this Europeanism, and to Americanize the movement, the author, as one of the editors of the book, has assembled a group of articles by German, Austrian and Russian socialists dealing with European problems, and published them for the American reader. What a strange way of Americanizing the American movement!

### III.

What is the point of view that this volume represents? It is clearly stated in the article on "The Crisis of Capitalism and the Crisis of Socialism" by S. Portugeis. S. Portugeis (although the translation does not do him justice) is a brilliant and clever journalist. He is doubtless the best exponent of the point of view represented in the book. Even when he was connected with the Russian Social Democratic Party (Mensheviki) he was of the extreme right wing. At present, since no social democratic party is "right enough" for him, he is not connected with any party in the Labor and Socialist International.

There was a time, Portugeis tells us, "when the socialist movement was animated by the faith and conviction that capitalism would break its neck as a result of a particular crisis." It is different now. "The point is," Portugeis tells us, "that such faith and hope have virtually entirely disappeared from the consciousness of contemporary Socialism." He proves his point by calling on Karl Kautsky. "Such a true disciple of Marx as Karl Kautsky," the author tells us, was also com-

## The Socialism of the Hopeless

pelled to revise his views. "Kautsky has come to the conclusion that it is quite impossible to foresee and determine the **economic** inevitability of the destruction of capitalism, and that this destruction would be the consequence not of economic but of the play of social-political factors." Kautsky, the author tells us, has come to the following conclusions: "*The more prosperous and successful the capitalist system of production is, the brighter the prospects of success for a socialist regime that will come to take the place of the capitalist one.*" (italicized by the author.) There were, there probably still are, "foolish socialists, and of course communists, who thought that for them there was no more important problem than not to permit this ruined capitalism to rise again." They were of course wrong, and Portugeis with glee reports that Kautsky (and of course he, Portugeis) were never so foolish. "At the national congress of workmen's deputies Kautsky warned against the policy of ruining the employers by putting forth extreme demands, demands which threatened the enterprises with inevitable destruction." That, Portugeis thinks was the best socialist policy. To make his point of view even more clear, he quotes with approval from the report made by Tarnov, representative of the German trade unions to the Leipzig Congress of the German Social Democratic Party in June 1931. Here is the quotation in full:

"He (i.e. Tarnov) argued that Socialism stands before the sick bed of capitalism not only as the heir of the capitalist order, quite ready to administer a dose of poison to the patient, if need be, to facilitate his departure, but also as a physician who is compelled to help the patient to recovery."

"The patient aroused very little sympathy in us, but the masses who stand behind him while he is in the process of agony are starving. And realizing this, we are ready to apply any medicine we may have, however doubtful we may regard its effectiveness in the long run, to alleviate the condition of the patient, provided such treatment will bring the masses food."

Portugeis, however, is afraid that his readers may think

## The American Socialist Quarterly

that this was the point of view only of German Social Democracy. This, he tells us, is a mistake. "In substance it has become the position of the entire International." This is exactly what the revolutionary Marxists in the Socialist International are fighting against, and what the volume under consideration is out to defend.

The *leit motif* of the book is hopelessness. Portugeis tells us that when capitalism is sick we must approach it not as executioners, but as physicians. Everywhere, capitalism now is sick and will be sick, it seems, for quite a long time. There is, therefore, nothing else for socialists to do but to help capitalism out of its difficulties, make it healthy, strong and prosperous, and . . . then what? To this last question there is no answer in the book.

### IV.

This "New Socialism" was tried out in Germany. It failed lamentably. Is there anything that we are to learn from the German failure? No, answers Karl Kautsky in his contribution to the present book "Hitlerism and Social Democracy". For one, who like the writer worshipped and revered Kautsky for years, though not always agreeing with him in every particular, it is painful to read Kautsky's article. Gone is his vigor, his acute sense of analysis, his clear Marxian way of thinking. There is really no conviction in his arguments. This is Kautsky's explanation of the German tragedy:

"History willed it that victory should go first not only to the anti-capitalist, but also to the anti-democratic elements of the politically untrained portion of the proletariat as against the democratic groups. This happened in Russia where it led to the dictatorship of the Bolsheviki. (p. 96)

and

"Many German socialists now declare calmly that they made a mistake in supporting the policy of the lesser evil. They have no reason, however, to don sack-cloth and ashes—certainly not until it is demonstrated that any other policy could have averted the Hitler dictatorship."

## The Socialism of the Hopeless

(p. 59.)

No one can, of course, "demonstrate" what **would have happened** if any other policy would have been used; therefore this ends the discussion. No one being able to demonstrate what any other policy could have accomplished, Kautsky feels justified in making the following defense of the tactics used:

"The Social Democratic policy at least made possible the averting for a time of the greater evil, the Hitler dictatorship."

It is characteristic for reformists to believe that the choice before us is either reformism or communism. "Had the socialists followed the policy of the communists, the socialists themselves would have put Hitler in the saddle." (p. 59.) No revolutionary socialist would, of course, have advised the German socialists, or any one else, to follow the communists. That the communist movement in Germany, as well as everywhere else, has been a counter-revolutionary force there can be no question; that the Communist International is more responsible for Hitler's victory than the strength of Hitler's own forces, is now acknowledged by everyone. But it does not follow that by carrying out a revolutionary socialist policy, the Social Democrats could not have conquered the reactionary elements of the right, as well as of the left. The left tendency in the International Socialist movement does not lead to communism. It leads away from communism as well as away from reformism. Its motto is: back to revolutionary Socialism.

---

The book also contains an article by Kautsky, "Marxism and Bolshevism", an article by Yourievsky (by far the best and most important article), "From Lenin to Stalin", an analysis of fascism by W. Ellenbogen, and an analysis of the communist movement according to official figures, by D. Shub.

As an expression of the extreme right reformist point of view, most of the articles are excellent. The contributors know what they want, and explain their point of view in a clear and forceful manner.