

Berne—A Post-mortem Conference

By LUDWIG LORE

If the world at large and the Socialist movement in particular still needed proof of the fact that the second International is dead, it was given at Berne, Switzerland, in the two weeks of February, when an International Conference of what remains of the proud Socialist International of former days, was first able to convene since the beginning of the war. How much better would it not have been to let the dead body rest, to bury decently an epoch of the Socialist movement that has done its work and should long ago have given place to one more fit to cope with the problems of a new age! As it is, the desperate efforts of the social-patriots and super-opportunists who arranged that sorrowful post-mortem, who tried to galvanize its corpse, served but to turn a tragedy into grim comedy, at the expense, albeit, of the international working class movement.

The program that was presented to the Congress when it convened showed how statesmanly the erstwhile leaders of the world-proletariat have become, how well they have learned to avoid those subjects that most urgently demand discussions, how completely they have subordinated working-class problems and working-class interests to their newly acquired sense of bourgeois-nationalistic responsibility. More than five years have passed since the representatives of the Socialist movement met to discuss their common aims and problems. And in these five years a new world was born. Thrones that seemed built upon rocks have been overturned. Armies that seemed invincible have been vanquished. Institutions that seemed built for eternity have been thrown on the scrap-heap. Day after day the human race has accomplished the impossible. Nations have gone under—new nations have arisen. The human race has gone through a period of unspeakable suffering, has shown itself capable of incredible sacrifices. New values have taken the place of old. The whole world is looking at life with new eyes, from a hitherto unknown point of view. These Socialist gentlemen alone have learned nothing, have forgotten nothing. They are prepared to go calmly on where they left off five years ago, thinking the same stereotyped sets of thoughts, using the same worn-out methods, with the same narrowminded ideals and aspirations. In Russia, in Germany, in Austria, and in Hungary the Socialist movement has overthrown

the established order and has taken the power out of the hands of the capitalist class. In every civilized nation revolution is hanging by a hair over the heads of a trembling capitalist class. And these gentlemen come together, placidly, with the dignity that becomes ministers and diplomats, to discuss "A League of Nations," "the regulation of territorial questions," "international labor legislation." Further they did not dare go. For these careful gentlemen felt, and perhaps not without good and sufficient cause, that a serious discussion of the fundamental questions that are agitating the world would bring about the hopeless collapse of the whole carefully erected edifice.

The purpose and aims of the entire Congress were very accurately characterized by Lorient (France) in his declaration to the International Conference:

"You have come together not for the purpose of finding a Socialist solution for the tragic problems that have followed in the wake of this greatest of all capitalist crimes, but for the purpose of finding some sort of justification for the governmental, nationalistic, chauvinistic neo-war-Socialism that flourished upon the ruins of the Socialist movement after the outbreak of the war.

"You are here, not in order to give expression to your determination to fulfill your Socialist ideals, but in order to document the agreement of the International with the policies of Wilson, the representative of American multi-millionaires.

"You have met, finally, and above all, to condemn the tremendous struggle for freedom that is spreading out from Russia all over Western Europe

"The history of Socialism will not be written in your Congress. It is being written, page by page, day by day, by the proletariat itself, and today the elite of this, the class-conscious, revolutionary proletariat, no longer stands behind you!"

The conference itself was characterized by certain departures from the method of procedure usually adopted at former International Congresses. Though unimportant in themselves they serve to accentuate the spirit in which it was conceived. Newspapers of all shades and political affiliations had been so liberally deluged with reporters' cards that there were, in the convention hall, far more "gentlemen of the press" than there were actual delegates. On the other hand, the transactions were closed to the general public, "to avoid undesirable ovations." This did not prevent, however, the admission of ladies and gentlemen of the

"better class," while comrades, who are familiar figures in the international movement, were refused permission to enter the Conference Hall. The credentials of the so-called delegates were not passed upon by the body itself but by a commission, which, likewise, was not elected, but had been appointed for this purpose. Delegates were admitted against the protest of a part of the conference that objected to the admission of men, as in the instance of Frank Bohn from America, who had been sent by their respective governments, while the actually elected and accredited delegates from these countries were prevented, by the same governments, from attending the Conference.

In other respects also the Conference differed from Party Congresses of former years. The Socialist Party of Belgium refused to send delegates to meet the representatives of the German Social Democracy, until the latter have formally repudiated the crimes committed by the German militarist autocracy during the war. The Socialists of Switzerland, Italy, Serbia, Rumania, Norway, Denmark, and the Left Wing Socialists of Sweden had refused to participate in a conference controlled by social-patriots. Important questions were not decided according to the invariable method pursued at all International Socialist Congresses—by recorded votes—but by the very questionable and uncontrollable showing of hands. In fact the entire Conference, its order of business, the nomination of committees and commissions, the list of speakers and the presentation of resolutions, were all so completely in the hands of the engineers of the Conference, that one could not but receive the impression that these gentlemen favor democracy only when it can be used as a weapon against revolutionary Socialist methods.

At the insistence of Thomas, the arch-nationalist of the French Socialist movement, the question of responsibility for the war was taken up as the first order of business, and occupied the evening of the first and the entire second day of the session. As was to be expected, the German majority Socialists presented a resolution which, in spite of an evident desire to placate the French and Belgian Socialists, whitewashed not only their own actions, but indirectly even those of the former German government, and attributed the war to the general imperialistic development of the last decades. They did, however, promise to investigate the immediate occurrences that were responsible for its outbreak, and to publish, as soon as possible, all documents that may serve to shed some light upon this question. The committee-made resolution that was finally adopted, with very obvious reluctance on the part of the French majority Socialists, evaded the issue by accepting,

with a few courteous generalities, the statement of the German majority group, and leaving it to future Congresses to render a decision. The words with which Wels, the spokesman of the German majority Socialists, closed the discussion were significant: "The German majority Socialists are silent, and we hope that our French comrades will understand our silence."

Since it was the avowed purpose of the Conference to bring pressure to bear upon the Peace Congress in Paris, the question of a "League of Nations" was accorded a lion's share, both of time and rhetoric. Speaker after speaker emphasized the necessity of exerting a strong influence upon the negotiations in Paris, without, however, in any case being anything but delightfully vague as to the means by which this much to be desired end was to be accomplished. Indeed it must be admitted that the powers that be who were making history in Paris, while the Berne Conference was consuming valuable time with optimistic speeches, seemed to have little or no regard for the intentions and desires of these powerful representatives of the international working class. By the strange irony of circumstance, the revolutionary uprisings of the German and the Hungarian proletariat, the threatening attitude of English and French labor, the rumbling in Southern Europe, in the Balkans and in Italy, and surely the Soviet Government of Russia, seemed to interest the great rulers of the world more keenly, seemed more forcibly able to influence their actions and decisions, than all the words and all the resolutions that were sent over the wires from the "Socialist" International Conference at Berne.

On the whole, the persons who participated in the Convention were far more interesting than the resolutions that were finally adopted. "In the eyes and in the whole deportment of most of the delegates," writes a Swiss comrade, "one saw the desperate desire to create an impression, the real bourgeois arrogance, the emptiness of soul and spirit that characterizes the political aspirant. One felt depressed in this sickening atmosphere of hypocrisy, of phrases and demagoguery. One longed for a breath of fresh, revolutionary air, of healthy fanaticism, and enthusiasm for Socialist ideals, for true freedom. One was forcibly struck by the contrast between the few revolutionaries who were present and the great majority of opportunists, who seemed to feel called upon to prove their individual fitness to occupy ministerial seats in their respective governments."

In comparison with the social-patriots of France and Germany, the British delegation, while no-one could accuse them of an overabundance of radical sentiment, appeared in an extremely

sympathetic light. There was in their speeches and in their attitude nothing of the intense nationalism, that placed the French and German majority delegations, and those that came from some of the smaller nations and national groups, so completely beyond the pale of serious consideration. They evidenced a clear desire to render impartial judgment. Their words and actions were free from jingoism, their speeches gave some indication at least, of a wholesome idealism and faith in the power of the working-class. While they did not go so far as to indorse the actions of the Russian revolutionary government, and, in the main agreed with the prevailing sentiment that "democracy" must not be subordinated to Socialism, they were obviously unwilling to render snap judgment upon the Russian comrades, based only on the strength of the lies and slanders that have thus far been the sole source of information about Russian conditions.

Of the delegates to the convention, Kurt Eisner was one of the few who showed a willingness to learn from the past and to meet the issues that face the world squarely and courageously. During the discussion of the responsibility for the war, while the French and German government Socialists were vying with each other in mutual recriminations, when Kautsky warned the Conference to forget past grievances in order to be prepared to meet the menaces that threatened the international Socialist movement, from counter-revolution on the one hand and Bolshevism on the other, when even Friederich Adler tried to bring about a peaceful understanding by explaining that the German and Austrian workers had striven to defend their country against the menace of Russian robbery and greed, just as the French had protected their nation against the ravages of German attack, Eisner unflinchingly shouldered the burden of responsibility. He condemned the attempts of the majority Socialists to hide behind exploded legends.

"Are you revolutionists or not," he demanded. "If so you must punish the old system . . . The minutes of the caucus session of the Socialist Reichstag group of August, 1914, should be published. Wels and the others have lost their memories.

"They helped to throw Germany into an abyss. They did not have the courage to vote against Brest-Litovsk. It is worse to carry the war into another country than to bear it one-self. We suffered unspeakably under the hunger-blockade, but we have no right to protest, for Germany provoked the blockade by her disregard of every principle of international justice."

Later when the question of prisoners of war was under discussion, and the German majority delegates were bitter in their denunciation of the Allied governments for refusing to liberate German prisoners of war, thus provoking the French delegates to equally bitter recrimination against the Germans for their alleged inhuman treatment of Allied prisoners, Eisner again showed the same freedom from nationalist prejudice:

"Have we the right to protest? I say no. It is too late! Shall we protest against involuntary servitude, who countenanced the forcible employment of 10,000, aye 100,000 human beings, worse than in the middle-ages? Have we forgotten that young girls were dragged out of France and Belgium to work for their captors? Have we forgotten how French industry was destroyed, how their bridges, their factories, their railroads have been devastated? We have no right to protest. To alleviate the lot of these prisoners must be our first consideration. . . . It is the duty of Germany to help rebuild in France and Belgium, willingly, as a penance."

As we look back over the International Socialist movement of the last two decades, it would seem as if its entire development was one of stubborn and tenacious resistance to the inevitable day of reckoning that has now come upon it. We spoke of the coming world war, yet feared to look its consequences in the face; at Basel we staged an impressive and heart-stirring demonstration of proletarian internationalism—and steadfastly refused to decide upon that most important of all questions, the attitude of the Socialist movement in the various countries in case of war. We wrote books and delivered speeches filled with high-sounding phrases of the overthrow of Capitalism—and unconsciously shrank from forming in our own minds and in the minds of our hearers a definite concept of the course that such action would involve. We used the phrase "expropriation of the expropriator"—and our horror over the methods that have been employed by the Russian revolutionists to put this idea into active operation shows how thoughtlessly these words were actually used. The history of the international Socialist movement of recent years has, in fact, been one of consistent procrastination and self-deception.

What was unforgiveable short-sightedness before the war, however, becomes a crime in the face of the tragedy that the world has undergone. The Socialist leader who, in the midst of this ruin and devastation, face to face with nationalist hatred in the very heart of the International, still pins the future of the

working-class to a "League of Nations" controlled by Imperialism for openly imperialistic aims, who can aspire no higher than to the international regulation of labor legislation by capitalist powers at a time when Imperialism is trembling at the sound of revolution in every country of the world, is, consciously or unconsciously, betraying the spirit of the movement that looks to him for guidance.

Whatever one may think of the course of action that has been adopted by the Bolshevik rulers of Russia, there can be but one opinion as to the serious nature of the problem their activity presents. Russia is the first state to come under Socialist rule, the first state to attempt the full realization of the Socialist program of industrial socialization. This being the case, it seems that an international Socialist conference would under all circumstances regard the problems that have been created by this new social experiment as of vital and consuming interest, and would make them the center of discussion. When one considers that nation after nation is shaking off the yoke of capitalist domination, that the coming months may see the rule of the proletariat established in every industrially developed country of Europe, does it not seem as if some united course of activity, some method of binding together these proletarian nations for united resistance against the common capitalist foe should have been decided upon, or at least seriously discussed? Actually, however, the Berne Conference took exactly the opposite course. In the original order of business laid before the conference, there was nothing that even indicated the existence of such problems. Only upon a motion of Thomas was it brought up for discussion, and then in a form that circumvented the necessity of taking a definite position. Ostensibly the discussion was limited, or rather broadened so as to cover the entire question of "Socialism vs. Democracy." As a matter of fact, the speakers, from Karl Kautsky, who maintained that the Bolsheviks had accomplished nothing but the creation of a large army, to Axelrod, the violent Russian anti-Bolshevik Socialist, refrained, with notable unanimity, from discussing the question in its theoretical aspects. It was evident that the whole discussion had put the conference into an extremely uncomfortable position necessitating, as it did, some open statement of its position. But this is exactly what the gentlemen of the Right and the Center were not prepared to do. Not that they have hesitated in the past to speak their opinions openly where the Soviet government is concerned. But recent events in Europe, the spread of revolutionary sentiment, as well as the strong likelihood that the Allied powers will, sooner or later, come to some sort of a working agreement with the Russian govern-

ment have convinced them of the foolhardiness of committing themselves to an anti-Bolshevik declaration before a proletariat that is looking more and more to the Russian republic for inspiration. This accounts for the minimum of time allotted to the discussion of this extremely important question. It accounts too, for the ambiguous wording of the question as it came up for discussion to be sent to Russia. It explains also, why the Conference refrained from coming to a vote on the question. It was the cowardly climax of a cowardly convention.

The one definite result that the Conference accomplished was the very thing it had striven most desperately to prevent. It proved to the Socialist movement of the whole world that the parting of ways had been reached. The best efforts of sentimental idealists like Friedrich Adler and others who attended the Conference not because they were in sympathy with the majority but because they hoped that it would be possible, now that the war is over, once more to bring together the various elements of the movement in some kind of understanding were in vain. There can be no cohesion between social patriots and revolutionists. There can be no understanding between those who have done the work of the counter-revolution in Russia, and its revolutionists; there can be no harmony between the Spartacides and the people who represent the Ebert government. It is for the Socialist movement in every country to decide whether it will stand with those who have compromised, and are continuing to compromise the Socialist movement in the interests of the bourgeoisie, or whether it will lend its undivided support and allegiance to the struggling revolutionary movement of the working-class.
