Emergency Decrees Test Peoples' Front In France

By August Thalheimer

With the return of Laval from Geneva the French government has issued a second set of emergency decrees. This makes 80 decrees todate. It is impossible and unnecessary to discuss each of them in detail, suffice it to indicate their general character and the perspectives they lead to.

THE FIRST DECREES

The first set of emergency decrees issued by Laval shortly after July 14th considerably reduced the salaries of civil service and government employes—the pensions of war veterans, the incomes of small bondholders—in short, social legislation suffered. The total amount "saved" thereby was about 11 billion francs. The second set of emergency decrees recently issued is a sort of balm for those hit by the first set—the small bondholders and peasants. Living costs and interest rates are to be reduced and a program of public works has been decided upon.

THE PRESENT DECREES

Considering the plan as a whole, it reminds us of the plan Bruening carried out in Germany. He, too, cut the salaries of government employes in response to the cry of the bourgeoisie which campaigned against the extensive and expensive state apparatus. (In the Reich the state apparatus has become much bigger and swallows up far greater amounts but the bourgeoisie is more than compensated for this loss thru the increased exploitation of the working class.) As in France, so also in Germany the reduction of government wages was to provide the basis for corresponding action on the part of private industry. By first cutting the wages of government employes the German as well as the French government intended to successfully prevent the working class from waging a joint struggle with the government employes. To counter-balance the reduction of wages, Bruening promised to reduce food prices. He appointed a "Price-Commissar" by the name of Goerdeler who was to put such reductions into effect. The same Goerdeler has again been appointed Price Commissar by Schacht. He failed miserably because of the resistance offered by the great trusts and large landowners. His activities were mere pretense aimed at deceiving and pacifying the working class. The net result was a considerable lowering of the standard of living of the workers. Prices remained the same or rose even higher.

THE FRENCH PLAN

Laval did not appoint a price commissar. He called a meeting of the 80 prefects of all French departments and ordered them to use full initiative in carrying out price reductions. It is quite clear that this attempt, made in an effective fashion will fail just as Bruening's similar attempt failed. The underlying cause is exactly the same in France as in Germany. In order actually to control prices thru the state two fundamental pre-requisites must be present. The state must freely dispose of all production, or at least of decisive sections of it. This, again, is possible only if the state is the owner of the decisive means of production and distribution—in other words, if the basis of a socialist economy is created. The broad working masses, in organized form, as well as the state employes must participate in this action. These pre-requisites exist in the Soviet Union and we can easily see how the Soviet state effectively controls the price system. In Germany and France such is not the case; both governments are the instruments of capital and stubborn opponents of all socialst measures.

EFFECT ON MIDDLE CLASS

In France a particular situation exists inasmuch as the small producers, especially the small peasants, are separated from the consumers by an exceptionally broad and parasitic class of middlemen. What will the emergency decrees of Laval, calling for a reduction of prices, result in? Big business largely responsible for high prices will not be effected in the least. Small dealers and small producers will bear the brunt of the burden. These constitute a broad mass of people hard pressed for their existence. The result will be that they will be dissatisfied and enraged while the consumers will not be able to benefit from price reductions and will also remain dissatisfied.

If the proletarian united front or the Peoples Front does not succeed in getting rid of the entire system of emergency decrees and in shifting the burdens of the crisis to the owning class, fascism will be able to gain a mass basis among the petty bourgeoisie and among sections of the working class—a basis which it lacks today.

RADICAL SOCIALISTS BLOCK ACTION

What is the outlook for such action on the part of the Peoples Front? The **Radical Socialist** party has todate refused to fight the emergency decrees under all sorts of pretenses. It is doing its utmost to prevent and sabotage such struggles. It has refused to help reconvene parliament in order to overthrow Laval, tho the parliamentary groups belonging to the Peoples Front have the necessary formal right to do so. It has made use of the Brest and Toulon events to warn against "excess" of the workers, to arouse sentiment against strikes, tocall upon workers and public employes to keep "order" and preserve their "dignity," in other words, to deprive the workers of the only effective weapon they possess—the right to strike.

This attitude of the Radical Socialist Party is of course linked up with the fact that the leader of the party and several of its outstanding members are part of Laval's cabinet and helped introduce the emergency decrees. Furthermore, since Laval separated the attack on the wages of public employes from that of the workers, the bourgeois press has succeeded pretty well in arousing a section of the petty bourgeois against the employes who are, fighting wage cuts.

The CGT (reformist trade unions) on the other hand, has shown very little inclination to make use of the strike as a weapon to fight the emergency decrees thus hampering effective mass action. Following the events of Brest and Toulon criticism was directed at the "provocateurs" who victimized the workers (undoubtedly, fascist provocateurs did have a finger in the pie) and the issuing of a call for a sympathy strike was completely forgotten. A parliamentary investigation committee was appointed and there the matter rests.

Thus the united front and the Peoples Front are actually **hampering** mass action against the decrees.

FINAL TEST IS COMING

Need we add that if this condition persists, things will take a fatal turn. The CP of France must realize that the united front and the Peoples Front has missed its purpose if it acts as a brake on mass action and that it is necessary when such hindrances arise to appeal to the membership and the broad masses of unorganized workers over the heads of their leaders, to organize them into broad united front organs and thus to exert pressure against the leadership.

The future form of the struggle against Laval's emergency decrees will be of decisive importance to the anti-fascist struggle in France. A successful struggle against the decrees will be a test of the power of the united front and the Peoples Front in the eyes of the urban petty bourgeois masses and the small peasants who still cling to the traditions of bourgeois democracy—it will be a test of their own faith in bourgeois democracy.

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