

NORMAN THOMAS ON WAR AND REVOLUTION

(A REVIEW OF THOMAS' LATEST BOOK*)

By BERTRAM D. WOLFE

Norman Thomas has moved somewhat left since his previous published writings, yet this book, like its predecessors, gives the Marxist reviewer an uneasy feeling that he is not dealing with the work of a working class leader and fighter, but rather with that of a left liberal who sympathizes with the working class without ever quite ceasing to wring his hands and deplore the necessity and sharpness of its struggle.

The author's leftward development is manifest in many passages of the work. There is a shrinking approach to the recognition of some of the necessities of the proletarian revolution. A number of pages of warning of its cost and pain, and wishing, hoping, even suggesting that we might be able to end capitalism without it, terminates in such a passage as this:

"The Observer (Thomas always talks in this book like an observer rather than a participant and leader in the class struggle) . . . is warranted . . . in concluding that some type of violent revolution is more probable than peaceful revolution, just as new international war is more probable than peace. But here, also, probability is not inevitability."

And still more forthright:

"The same revolutionist in a country like the United States will not feel that he can utterly renounce the use of violence as a weapon for the exploited while the exploiters still cling tenaciously to it." In this connection he quite properly emphasizes the necessity of reducing this violence to a minimum, not regarding it as a substitute for organizing, educating, and winning the support of the proletariat and other sections of the population, and putting the onus of violence where it belongs, upon the ruling class. This he follows with the illusory suggestion that probably the proletariat can win power by peaceful parliamentary means and use armed force only to maintain itself in power against counter-revolution.

Second Hand Marxism

Thomas has also moved towards a more Marxist attitude towards the state. On pages 108 and 109 we find the formulation:

" . . . the political state had its rise in violence and has found in violence its final coercive power . . . Governments have acted as executive committees for the dominant class."

This is all to the good, but when Thomas comes to apply it in making demands on and proposals for the American government in war, he entirely forgets his new-found theoretical knowledge. Moreover, it is painfully clear from a careful study of every word and every footnote of his book, that he has not gone to Marx first hand, but has moved towards Marxism because of second-hand, superficial and journalistic sources like Mumford and Hanighen and Brailsford, and especially Laski have borrowed more freely from Marx since the depression. Indeed it is one of the curiosities of Socialist literature that nowhere in this 234 page book does Thomas once refer to Marx or mention his name, or, in a book stuffed with quotations, quote a word from him or give evidence in so much as a line of his own writing that he ever read a line of the writings of Marx.

Lenin Might As Well Not Have Written

But it is war, not the state and revolution that forms the center and bulk of this book. It is hard to imagine a serious writer on new developments on evolution who has not read and does not refer to the work of Darwin, Mendel, De Vries, Morgan, but only to magazine articles and popularizations on biology. In the same sense it is incredible that any informed writer should attempt to discuss imperialism, war and proletarian tactics in relation thereto, without referring to or utilizing (or at least polemizing against) Lenin's classic works on "Imperialism," "Socialism and War," "War and the Second International" and the entire material contained in volumes XVIII to XXI of Lenin's collected works. Yet this is exactly what Norman Thomas does. There is not even the slightest evidence in a line or a syllable that Thomas took the trouble to examine the most important works on the subject before formulating or offering his views!

And the views are what might be expected under the circumstances. The passages dealing with the horrors of war are good. The quotations from poets and novelists are moving. But the analysis of the causes of war and imperialism

ism is as superficial and trivial as its sources (John Kenneth Turner, Walter Millis, Parker T. Moon, Carleton Hayes) and the guidance he offers to an anxious proletariat oppressed by the danger of impending war, is quite worthless.

What guidance is there in such phrases as this: "We have to wage peace, and risk something for peace."

Or in a five-point program which involves: "1) An immediate, solemn declaration of national policy by the President and Congress that the United States will not supply . . . arms, munitions or financial support to belligerents . . ."

Thomas realizes that thereby a country like Ethiopia, which has no munitions factories, is condemned to defense-

lessness to the advantage of Italy but he proposes that the government might "then make any exception which may seem morally desirable by formal act." Which leaves the American capitalist government as the moral judge, in complete forgetfulness of Laski's "Marxist" theory of the State!

"2) . . . the largest measure of disarmament that the public can be persuaded to accept," And ". . . by making it clear that we would not fight for trade we would get more by good will than we are getting by competing armament."

But how can an imperialist power make that falsehood "clear"? Is that not the official declaration of every imperialist power? Is that not the substance of the fraudulent Kellogg Pact declaration? No answer from Norman Thomas.

3) The abandonment of imperialist policies. Thomas dimly feels their inseparability from capitalism but repeatedly appears to hope that the leopard can be induced to change his spots and his predatory habits.

4) Abolition of discrimination against Chinese and Japanese immigration.

5) "Isolation from all that makes for war; cooperation with all that makes for peace."

A whole book on the horrors and costs of war to culminate in such a deceptive and worthless program!

And then, if war comes anyhow, "I should, of course, favor seeing to it that no one should grow wealthy out of it as thousands did in the First World War."

Can the reader imagine Lenin, with his ceaseless preoccupation with the turning of the imperialist war into a civil war against capitalism and its war breeding system, coming to such piddling conclusions,

Anti-Soviet Bias

Norman Thomas' anti-Soviet bias has considerably softened, but it still sticks out thru many passages of his book. Most curious and revealing are his repeated strictures on the Soviet Union for not entering into a lone boycott of Italy with respect to oil and wheat when

contrasted with his note to page 177 defending the United States for not entering on lone sanctions against Japan in connection with the invasion of Manchuria. The tell-tale note reads:

"The use of economic sanctions, i.e., official embargoes—beyond those on war supplies—on goods going to or coming from an aggressor nation, might have brought Japan to an abandonment of her attack on Manchuria only if action against her included all the strong powers in the world. For the United States alone to have imposed it might have led to war. Even the continued refusal of recognition to the new puppet state, Manchukuo, is an empty, and perhaps dangerous gesture of righteousness."

If the helpless Daily Worker editors who have been trying to explain Browder's weak answers to Thomas on this question during their recent debate, would quote this interesting passage, they would have silenced Thomas at once!

LOSING THEIR CHAINS . . . by James Sand

Two Knights Without a Single Cause-U. S. Stephens and T. V. Powderly

ONE of the standing problems of American labor history is how a man like Terence Vincent Powderly was able to monopolize the national leadership of the Knights of Labor for fourteen years,—a period spanning the entire significant life of the organization. He did not, in any profound way, make the lot of the American worker better; his economic and social theory was ludicrous; and, as John Swinton, a penetrating labor-journalist of the time has remarked, he had none of the external characteristics of a labor leader. Ware, in his work on American labor from 1860 to 1895, has most satisfactorily supplied the answer to this historical anomaly. Powderly, he says, "was a good constitutionalist and in the General Assembly was always able to find some technicality to disarm his enemies. He appointed most of the committees of the assembly, the committee on credentials in especial, and in the later years he had a machine of his own." There is practically nothing of a large order that Powderly did for labor that was correct for the time and place, and his theories lacked the universality necessary to vital continuance after their author's passing. His errors were grandiloquent; his truths picayune.

BIRTH OF THE "KNIGHTS"

In early December 1869 "The Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor" was founded in Philadelphia by Uriah S. Stephens and a small group of garment cutters, fellow-members of Stephens' craft. The Order was to be secret and involve complicated initiation ceremonies and meetings, along with high-sounding titles,—the last to be retained all through the history of the Knights of Labor. This continued until 1878 when the Knights came overground and established themselves on a national scale. Under Stephens' regime the Order grew very slowly, some few local assemblies being formed.

The Knights of Labor was not intended to be a trade-union organization; it was started as a fraternal order with humanitarian purposes, and Powderly and his henchmen later retained these aims long after the temper of the members had become unionist. The secrecy and ritualism Stephens carried over from the bourgeois societies of which he was a member, the Masons, Odd Fellows, and the Knights of Pythias. And Stephens' social views were wholly in accord with the organizational accoutrements. He had been educated for the Baptist ministry and injected religious obscurities into an already confused jargon. A Knight on being initiated took an oath which contained the following:

"Labor is noble and holy. To defend it from degradation; to divest it of the evils to body, mind, and estate which ignorance and greed have imposed; to rescue the toiler from the grasp of the selfish—is a work worthy of the noblest and best of our race. . . . We mean to uphold the dignity of labor, to affirm the nobility of all who earn their bread by the sweat of their brows. We mean to create a healthy public opinion on the subject of labor (the only creator of values). . . . To pause in his toil, to devote to his own interests, to gather a knowledge of the world's commerce, to unite, combine, and co-operate in the great army of peace and industry, to nourish and cherish, build and develop, the temple he lives in, is the highest and noblest duty of man to himself, to his fellow men, and to his Creator."

The Molly Maguires had in 1877 put all secret organizations, and particularly secret labor organizations, under a legal cloud, and consequently at the first national convention of the Knights in 1878 secrecy was dropped. The wave of strikes which had occurred the year before had aroused many of the American workers and they were ready for organization. The Knights of Labor was at hand and took advantage of the situation to transform itself into a national movement. A constitution was adopted creating local assemblies, district assemblies, and a national assembly or convention. A General Executive Board was created presided over by the Grand Master Workman.

ENTER POWDERLY

The next year Powderly was elected to this office and held it until 1893 when he was suspended and then expelled from the Order. By that time the organization had spent its strength and filled out its significant life-span.* Permitting petty-bourgeois elements to flood the assemblies,—small shopkeepers, farmers, lawyers, doctors,—militated against proletarian strength; the growth of the American Federation of Labor since its inception in 1886, the opposition of the Socialist Labor Party to the Knights of Labor personified particularly by Daniel DeLeon; and the premature industrial unionism which resulted in the skilled crafts constantly being called on to pull the unskilled out of strikes which they were losing, all helped to undermine the Knights. Moreover, the undeveloped state of capitalism which made it possible for a worker to become an owner, and the beginnings of great waves of European immigration were added factors. But not the least was the absence of a leadership understanding of the class-structure of the time, of the stage of capitalistic development and the forms of organization appropriate to it.

Grand Master Workman Powderly was born on January 22nd 1849 at Carbondale, Pennsylvania of poor Irish stock. At thirteen he was a railroad switchman; then he became a car repairer, and a machinist. He became a member of the Knights of Labor in 1874. For three terms he held the office of mayor of Scranton, Pennsylvania, and during most of that time he was also grand master workman of the Knights. During one of his fits of pique, he wrote, "The position I hold is too big for any ten men. It is certainly too big for me and I am only too willing to hand it over at once to whoever may be selected." Even though the job as head of the Knights of Labor was "too big for any ten men," the mayor's office of Scranton and his post in the Knights of Labor were only part of Powderly's simultaneous accomplishments. He was also health officer of Pennsylvania county and part owner and manager of a tea and coffee store. Throughout his official work in the Knights he showed constant symptoms of hypochondria. But he lived to the ripe age of seventy-five, dying in 1924, in June, a half-year before Gompers passed on. Like some latter-day labor prophets who turned New Dealers, Powderly ended his days in a soft job in Washington.

Various means of gaining concessions and improving the economic lot of the workers and petty bourgeoisie were tried in the Order. The most successful was

the boycott, since it required no strike-fund, at the collecting of which Powderly was incompetent. In the matter of strikes, the Knights of Labor had three periods; from 1869 to 1878 they opposed them; from 1878 to 1883 they favored them; from 1883-1893 strikes were under a cloud. In the last period, however, they were constantly being called by the local and district assemblies over the heads of the General Executive Board which nominally had the power of calling them. The G.E.B. may not have called them, but it successfully broke them. The Chicago stockyards strike and the strike on Jay Gould's Southwest Railroad Powderly called off just as they were about to be won. It has never been ascertained what was thus gained, but certain other dealings Powderly had with employers against whom the Knights had once struck make the occurrences seem just a bit shady. One instance: Hayes, who was Powderly's right-hand man in the Knights until 1893 when he turned on him and helped throw him out, went west to solicit advertising for a little private money-making venture in which Powderly was also interested, and Powderly was asked to write a letter to Armour of Chicago packing-house infamy with whom he had become acquainted when the Knights had fought him in labor-battles. Giving Hayes a letter of introduction was a bit too thick even for Powderly, and he balks at that aspect of it. He writes Hayes: "You know I have been fifteen years fighting the men we are now asking favors from and it is a trifle against the grain to write some of them." Writing was against the grain but soliciting advertising was not.

DECLINE OF THE "KNIGHTS"

In 1886 the Haymarket bomb offered the Knights a chance to show their solidarity with labor and the anarchists who were being framed for the explosion in Chicago. Powderly, true to form, backed down on them, and the Knights were dealt one more body-blow to those already delivered to it. In that year they had reached their peak in membership with something over 700,000 but within another year they had lost a quarter of a million of them, and by 1893 the Order was a mere shell. Hayes, in conjunction with a farmer-labor clique, had Powderly ejected.

But he was not done showing his allegiance to the proletariat. At the age of forty-five in 1894 he was admitted to the bar of Pennsylvania, and in 1901 he was admitted to practice before the Supreme Court of the United States. In 1896 he stumped for McKinley and the Republican Party and in 1900 for Teddy Roosevelt, the old henchman of budding American imperialism. Powderly was a spell-binder who could go on for hours and he served the G.O.P. with those talents for which the Knights had no effective use. For his stumping he was given the job of United States Commissioner General of Immigration, and until his death he held offices in that bureau. For thirty years he lived on the reputation that continued selling out of the American proletariat had given him.

The one great sign of intelligence Powderly showed was in a letter he wrote to Hayes after his expulsion, in which he sets down the reasons for the failure of the Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor which the "sainted Stephens" had founded. He writes:

"Teacher of important and much-needed reforms, she has been obliged to practice differently from her teachings. Advocating arbitration and conciliation as first steps in labor disputes she has been forced to take upon her shoulders the responsibilities of the aggressor first, and when hopes of arbitrating and conciliating failed, to beg of the opposing side to do what we should have applied for in the first instance. Advising against strikes we have been in the midst of them. Urging important reforms we have been forced to yield our time and attention to petty disputes until we were placed in a position where we have frequently been misunderstood by the employee as well as the employer. While not a political party we have been forced into the attitude of taking political action."

To the world of labor letters he has left a compendious volume which was first published in 1889, called *Thirty Years of Labor*. It is without question the most soporific book in the field and will stand up with many competitors for this honor in other fields. He runs around from chapter to chapter in the "constructive" discussion looking for some one cure-all for the conflicts between capital and labor. During his lifetime he found a new cure almost every year. Once it was land, and then it was temperance. He was a crony of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. "The temperance question," he said, "is most important and sometimes I think it is the main issue." In crack-brains like Powderly the problem of labor is always getting confused with some crazy reform movement like temperance. Powderly, drunk as he was on his own verbiage, never needed the stimulation of whiskey.

"PARTY ABOVE LABOR"

Although he was the Greenback-Labor Mayor of Scranton and held a membership card as a Socialist, he is against a labor party. His genius for getting everything wrong breaks out again here. He says, "A labor party is not likely to become a success for the reason that it is not in accord with the genius of American institutions to form a party of any one class." The duty of the Knight of Labor is "to place citizenship above party." And for Powderly party above labor as he did when he stumped for the Republican ticket.

Engels thought better of the Knights of Labor than it really deserves. He felt that it could be worked with and turned into a Marxist labor organization. "I think the Knights of Labor," said Engels in 1886, "a most important factor in the movement which ought not to be pooh-poohed from without but to be revolutionized from within, and I consider that many of the Germans . . . have made a grievous mistake when they tried, in the face of a mighty and glorious movement not of their own creation, to make of their imported and not always understood theory a kind of 'alleinseligmachendes' dogma and to keep aloof from any movement which did not accept that dogma."

But in historical perspective we can say that the Germans of whom Engels speaks showed that at least their estimate of the Knights was correct when they subscribed under Sorge's leadership to the principles of trade unionism as they were becoming embodied in the American Federation of Labor. The sickly humanitarianism, the ideological confusion, the petty-bourgeois leadership, of the Knights made it impossible finally to "revolutionize it from within."

* * *

NEXT WEEK
A Pre-Marxian In America: Wilhelm Weitling

* *War, No Profit, No Glory, No Need*, by Norman Thomas. Stokes. 234 pp. \$1.50.

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