

THE PEOPLE'S FRONT COMES TO MEXICO

By BERTRAM D. WOLFE

Last week Comrade Wolfe discussed the fall of Calles and the rise to power of the present president Lazaro Cardenas.

In this article the author destroys a lot of illusions about the "workers' and peasants' socialist government of Mexico" as it is being called in the radical press.

Next week Comrade Wolfe discusses the relations of the Communist Party to the Cardenas regime.—Editor.

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WHEN in 1935 General Calles, for over ten years Mexico's strong man, left him a favorable opening, President Cardenas broke with his boss and creator and attempted to become boss of Mexico himself. Like Calles in 1924, he started his regime in a whirl of demagoguery so necessary to the consolidation of mass support. The circumstances of the break, repeating those of 1924, gave Cardenas the support of the Communist Party, the organized labor movement and the peasantry against Calles just as the latter had possessed the same support against De La Huerta at the beginning of his presidential career. But this time the Communist Party was in the throes of its People's Front policies which made a big difference in the nature of its support, as will become clear in the next article. At any rate, Cardenas had no reason for anticipating any trouble from the Left for some time to come. His most immediate concern was the Right: the Church and the landowners. By the peculiar logic of politics there was danger of the Clergy's rallying to the support of their arch-enemy of yesterday, General Calles, before the latter's hold on the government apparatus and his revolutionary prestige could be completely liquidated. In that case he would have a combination of forces capable of making an effective bid for power. If the reader wonders how the Church might support the arch Jacobin and arch anti-clerical of the past decade, he may be helped to grasp the logic of politics involved by contemplating the evolution of such a figure as Alfred E. Smith from the shining hero of the liberals into the darling of the Liberty League and the Union League Club.

Back To Church

Cardenas set about at once quietly patching up the deliberately aggravated conflict with the Church: he permitted the harshest laws to lapse, let the closed churches reopen, arranged for the courts to "revise" the legal seizures of Church property by the government. The Clergy had long been trying to evade these property laws by "selling" their holdings to trusted parishioners and lay leaders of the Church apparatus. Now the courts repeatedly found that these "innocent third parties" as "purchasers in good faith" should not have been disturbed in their possession of the properties in question, and that restitution should be made. The Church-State tension grew noticeably weaker.

But his problems with the peasantry were by no means completely solved either. In breaking with Calles he was glad of all the band-wagon jumpers he could get. Among them were Portes Gil, chairman of the National Revolutionary Party, and official patron of the National Peasants League. He was a potential rival for the post of **Jefe Maximo**: Cardenas could not altogether trust him, nor could he rest secure until he had grouped the organized peasants

around his person. Another Callista whose support he was glad to accept was General Cedillo. An old revolutionary leader, a military man, the governor and absolute boss for the better part of a decade of the rich state of San Luis Potosi, and the possessor of a vast and well equipped private armed force, he was a power to be reckoned with. In latter years, following the trajectory of the other "Men of the Revolution," Cedillo had become rich, a big landowner, conservative, and increasingly popular with the Catholic clerical party. Cardenas put him in his cabinet in the influential post of Minister of Agriculture. This was effective in retaining Cedillo's support, but made it necessary that the President should keep his Minister of Agriculture from attending to the duties of his office which would bring him into contact with the peasantry outside his domain of San Luis Potosi: it was more than ever imperative that General Cardenas should continue his trips around the countryside and personally attend to land distribution, irrigation, school installations, and road openings. The presidential palace still continues to be vacant most of the time.

Distribution of Land

To consolidate his peasant base and emphasize his position with Calles, General Cardenas greatly speeded up the program of land distribution. In the first twenty months of his administration he awarded nearly four and one-half million hectares of land to about three thousand villages. Thereby he distributed over half as much land as all of his predecessors together. However, one must not get the impression that the Mexican agrarian problem is now in a fair way to being solved. Here are a few of the reasons:

1. Only the larger villages are eligible. About two-thirds of the recorded rural settlements in Mexico are not entitled to receive any land under the law.

2. The majority of those eligible are too terrorized to apply for land. Cardenas may now be expected to slow up, not only on the basis of the precedents of Mexican history and the superior sweeping powers of new brooms, but because the Agrarian Department is actually running out of applications for land, with the bulk of the eligible villages not yet benefited.

3. The law does not propose to do away with the **latifundio**. The great estates, where touched, have been trimmed, not carved up, and generally only of their poorest lands.

4. Precisely those states where land concentration is greatest are the ones with the smallest rural settlements ineligible under the law.

5. The land is not being confiscated except where previous robbery of village lands can be legally proved. Out of the first 1,649 distributions only sixty-six were such "restitutions" of stolen lands. Since then (January 1st, 1937) "restitutions" have practically ceased.

6. The economic and hence political power of the **hacendados** is not being seriously impaired. They are compensated for the land taken by payment in agrarian bonds, which bonds are acceptable in payment of taxes. Where improved lands are taken, some improvements are paid for in cash.

7. The amounts distributed even to the eligible villages are in general inadequate for the maintenance of life. The average per

(Continued on Page 5)