
Circular Letter to Comintern-Affiliated Parties on Parliamentarism and the Soviets from Grigorii Zinoviev, President of ECCI, September 1, 1919.

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An alternate translation appears in Jane Degras (ed. and trans.), *The Communist International, 1919-1943: Documents*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), v. 1, pp. 66-70.

A few key passages of the original translation checked to Degras, resulting in minor modifications.

Dear Comrades!

The present phase of the revolutionary movement has, along with other questions, very sharply placed the question of parliamentarism upon the order of the day's discussion. In France, America, England, and Germany, simultaneously with the aggravation of the class struggle, all revolutionary elements are adhering to the Communist movement by uniting among themselves or by coordinating their actions under the slogan of Soviet power. The anarcho-syndicalist groups and the groups that now and then call themselves simply anarchistic are thus also joining the general current. The Executive Committee of the Communist International welcomes this most heartily.

In France the syndicalist group of Comrade Pericat forms the heart of the Communist Party; in America, and also to some extent in England, the fight for the Soviets is led by such organizations as the IWW (Industrial Workers of the World). These groups and tendencies have always actively opposed the parliamen-

tary methods of fighting.

On the other hand, the elements of the Communist Party that are derived from the Socialist Parties are, for the most part, inclined to recognize action in parliament, too (the Loriot group in France, the members of the SPA in America, of the Independent

Labour Party in England, etc.). All these tendencies, which ought to be united as soon as possible in the Communist Party, at all costs need uniform tactics. Consequently, the question must be decided on a broad scale and as a general measure, and the Executive Committee of the Communist International turns to all the affiliated parties with the present circular letter, which is especially dedicated to this question.

The universal unifying program is at the present moment the recognition of the struggle for

the dictatorship of the proletariat in the form of the Soviet power. History has so placed the question that it is right on this question that the line is drawn between the revolutionary proletariat and the opportun-



ists, between the communists and the social traitors of every brand. The so-called Center (Kautsky in Germany, Longuet in France, the ILP and some elements of the BSP in England, Hillquit in America) is, in spite of its protestations, an objectively anti-Socialist tendency, because it cannot, and does not wish to, lead the struggle for the Soviet power of the proletariat.

On the contrary, those groups and parties which formerly rejected any kind of political struggles (for example, some anarchist groups) have, by recognizing the Soviet power, the dictatorship of the proletariat, really abandoned their old standpoint as to political action, because they have recognized the idea of the seizure of power by the working class, the power that is necessary for the suppression of the opposing bourgeoisie. Thus, we repeat, a common program for the struggle for the Soviet dictatorship has been found.

The old divisions in the international labor movement have plainly outlived their time. The war has caused a regrouping. Many of the anarchists or syndicalists, who rejected parliamentarism, conducted themselves just as despicably and treasonably during the 5 years of the war as did the old leaders of the Social Democracy, who always have the name of Marx on their lips. The unification of forces is being effected in a new manner: some are for the proletarian revolution, for the Soviets, for the dictatorship, for mass action, even up to armed uprisings — the others are against this plan. This is the principle question of today. This is the main criterion. The new combinations will be formed according to these labels, and are being so formed already.

In what relation does the recognition of the Soviet idea stand to parliamentarism? Right here a sharp dividing line must be drawn between two questions which logically have nothing to do with each other: the question of parliamentarism as a desired form of the organization of the state and the question of the exploitation of parliamentarism for the development of the revolution. The comrades often confuse these two questions, something which has an extraordinarily injurious effect upon the entire practical struggle. We wish to discuss each of these questions in its order and draw all the necessary deductions.

What is the form of the proletarian dictatorship? We reply: The Soviets. This has been demonstrated by an experience that has a worldwide significance. Can

the Soviet power be combined with parliamentarism? No, and yet again, no. It is absolutely incompatible with the existing parliaments, because the parliamentary machine embodies the concentrated power of the bourgeoisie. The deputies, the chambers of deputies, their newspapers, the system of bribery, the secret connection of the parliamentarians with the leaders of the banks, the connection with all the apparatus of the bourgeois state — all these are fetters for the working class. They must be burst.

The governmental machine of the bourgeoisie, consequently also the bourgeois parliaments, are to be broken, disrupted, destroyed, and upon their ruins is to be organized a new power, the power of the union of the working class, the workers' "parliaments," i.e., the Soviets.

Only the betrayers of the workers can deceive the workers with the hope of a "peaceful" social revolution, along the lines of parliamentary reforms. Such persons are the worst enemies of the working class, and a most pitiless struggle must be waged against them; no compromise with them is permissible. Therefore, our slogan for any bourgeois country you may choose is: "*Down with Parliament! Long live Soviet power!*"

Nevertheless, a person may put the question this way: "Very well, you deny the power of the present bourgeois parliaments; then why don't you organize new, more democratic parliaments on the basis of a real universal suffrage?" During the Socialist revolution the struggle has become so acute that the working class must act quickly and resolutely, without allowing its class enemies to enter into its camp, into its organization of power. Such qualities are only found in the Soviets of workers, soldiers, sailors, and peasants, elected in the factories and shops, in the country, and in the barracks. So the question of the form of the proletarian power is just this way. Now the government is to be overthrown. Kings, presidents, parliaments, chambers of deputies, national assemblies — all these institutions are our sworn enemies that must be destroyed.

Now we take up the second basic question: can the bourgeois parliaments be fully utilized for the purpose of developing the revolutionary class struggle? Logically, as we just remarked, this question is by no means related to the first question. In fact, a person

surely can be trying to destroy any kind of organization by joining it and by utilizing it. This is also perfectly understood by our class enemies when they exploit the official Social Democratic parties, the trade unions, and the like for their purposes.

Let us take the extreme example: the Russian communists, the Bolsheviki, voted in the election for the Constituent Assembly. They met in its hall. But they came there to break up this assembly within 24 hours and fully to realize the Soviet power. The party of the Bolsheviki also had its deputies in the Tsar's Imperial Duma. Did the party at that time "recognize" the Duma as an ideal, or, at least, an endurable form of government? It would be lunacy to assume that. It sent its representatives there so as to proceed against the apparatus of the Tsarist power from that side, too, and to contribute to the destruction of that same Duma. It was not for nothing that the Tsarist government condemned the Bolshevik "parliamentarians" to prison for "high treason." The Bolshevik leaders were also carrying on an illegal work, although they temporarily made use of their "inviolability" in welding together the masses for the drive against Tsarism.

But Russia was not the only place where that kind of "parliamentary" activity was carried on. Look at Germany and the activities of Liebknecht. The murdered comrade was the perfect type of revolutionist; so was there then something non-revolutionary in the fact that he, from the tribune of the cursed Prussian Landtag, called upon the soldiers to rise against the Landtag? On the contrary. Here, too, we see the complete admissibility and usefulness of his exploitation of the situation. If Liebknecht had not been a deputy he would never have been able to accomplish such an act; his speeches would have had no such echo. The example of the Swedish Communists in parliament also convinces us of this. In Sweden Comrade Høglund played and plays the same role as Liebknecht did in Germany. Making use of his position as a deputy, he assists in destroying the bourgeois parliamentary system; none else in Sweden has done as much for the cause of the revolution and the struggle against the war as our friend.

In Bulgaria we see the same thing. The Bulgarian Communists have successfully exploited the tribune of parliament for revolutionary purposes. At the

recent elections they won seats for 47 deputies. Comrades Blagoev, Kirkov, Kolarov, and other leaders of the Bulgarian Communist Party understand how to exploit the parliamentary tribune in the service of the proletarian revolution. Such "parliamentary work" demands peculiar daring and a special revolutionary spirit; the men there are occupying especially dangerous positions; they are laying mines under the enemy while in the enemy's camp; they enter parliament for the purpose of getting this machine in their hands in order to assist the masses behind the walls of the parliament in the work of blowing it up.

Are we for the maintenance of the bourgeois "democratic" parliaments as the form of the administration of the state?

No, not in any case. We are for the Soviets.

Yes, we are for this — in consideration of a whole list of conditions. We know very well that in France, America, and England no such parliamentarians have yet arisen from the masses of the workers. In those countries we have up to now observed a picture of parliamentary betrayal. But this is no proof of the incorrectness of the tactics that we regard as correct!

It is only a matter of there being revolutionary parties there like the Bolsheviki or the German Spartacists. If there is such a party then everything can become quite different. It is particularly necessary: (1) that the deciding center of the struggle lies outside parliament (strikes, uprisings, and other kinds of mass action); (2) that the activities in parliament be combined with this struggle; (3) that the deputies also perform illegal work; (4) that they act for the Central Committee and submit to its orders; (5) that they do not heed the parliamentary forms in their acts (have no fear of direct clashes with the bourgeois majority, "talk past it," etc.).

The matter of taking part in the election at a given time during a given electoral campaign, depends upon a whole string of concrete circumstances which, in each country, must be particularly considered at each given time. The Russian Bolsheviki were for boycotting the elections for the first Imperial Duma in 1906. And these same persons were for taking part in the elections of the second Imperial Duma, when it had been shown that the bourgeois-agrarian power would still rule in Russia for many a year. In the year 1918,

†- These two sentences not included in the version of the document published in *Truth*.

before the election for the German National Assembly, one section of the Spartacists was for taking part in the elections, the other section was against it. But the party of the Spartacists remained a unified communist party.

In principle we cannot renounce utilization of parliamentarism. The party of the Russian Bolsheviki declared in the spring of 1918, at its 7th Congress, when it was already in power, in a special resolution that the Russian Communists, in case the bourgeois democracy in Russia, through a peculiar combination of circumstances, should once more get the upper hand, could be compelled to return to the utilization of bourgeois parliamentarism. Room for maneuvering is also to be allowed in this respect.

[What we wish specially to emphasize is that in all cases the question is really solved outside parliament, on the streets. Now it is clear that strikes and revolts are the only decisive methods of struggle between labor and capital. †] The comrades' principal efforts are to consist in the work of mobilizing the masses; establishing the party, organizing their own groups in the unions and capturing them, organizing Soviets in the course of the struggle, leading the mass struggle, agitation for the revolution among the masses — all

this is of first line of importance; parliamentary action and participation in electoral campaigns only as one of the helps in this work — no more.

If this is so — and it undoubtedly is so — it is a matter of course that it doesn't pay to split into those factions that are of different opinions only about this, now secondary, question. The practice of parliamentary prostitution was so disgusting that even the best comrades have prejudices in this question. These ought to be overcome in the course of the revolutionary struggle. Therefore, we urgently appeal to all groups and organizations which are carrying on a real struggle for the Soviets, and call upon them to unite firmly, even despite the lack of agreement on this question.

All those who are for the Soviets and the proletarian dictatorship will unite as soon as possible and form a unified communist party.

With communist greetings,

G. Zinoviev,

President of the Executive Committee
of the Communist International.

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Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport.

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