
Revolutionary Romantics:

Letter to the Editor of the *New York Call*, published April 14, 1919.

by Ralph Korngold

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Editor of *The Call*:

Certain literary gentlemen in New York, Boston, and elsewhere want a revolution in the United States. They want it right away. They are tired of voting. They are tired of teaching the masses how to vote. They sneer at ballot box victories, laugh at ballot box defeats, speak with disdain of “parliamentarianism” and parliamentary methods. They find education too slow a process, so they propose as a substitute Billy Sunday’s method — hysteria.

They don’t tell us exactly how their revolution is to be brought about. That is a minor detail to a revolutionary romanticist. As far as anyone is able to make out, it is going to be brought about by means of the old standby, the general strike, supplemented by general rioting. One of the editors of *The Liberator* quotes with evident approval the following statement of one R.F. Dunne, editor of the *Butte Daily Bulletin*:

“I don’t know what I am. I don’t call myself anything. But I’ll tell you what I think is going to happen and then you can call me anything you like. Craft unionism is out of date; it’s too late for industrial unionism; mass action is the only thing — mass action.”

“What do you mean? How will it come?”

“Well, unemployment will increase, there’ll be starvation, and some day the banks will fail, and the people will come pouring out into the streets and the revolution will start.”

This “revolutionist” to whom Comrade Crystal Eastman has gone, as to an oracle, for a forecast of our revolutionary future, and whom she compares with Lenin, ran only the other day on the Democratic ticket.

It is characteristic of these literary faddists and extremists that they never finish anything they start. They are incapable of persistent constructive work. Like

impatient children, they knock down or abandon the cardhouse they have only just begun, in order to build another. The IWW was their plaything but yesterday; today it is the Soviet; tomorrow “mass action.” The slow, plodding processes of education and organization they will have nothing of. The idea that workingmen who cannot summon up enough thought to vote for a thing on election day will be ready for that same thing — or something more radical — and will know how to use it, when they give way to hysteria and riot in the streets, is a lunatic’s idea.

But what is possible and what is impossible does not concern these gentlemen; only what is picturesque and romantic. The Soviet rule is “right,” so let’s have it. What does it matter that the workingmen of America, every time they have had a chance, have rejected a much milder socialist program? Just beat the tom-toms and get them to the proper pitch of excitement and they will establish Soviet rule. The present program of the Socialist Party is far too advanced to suit the American workingmen, so let us make it a good deal more advanced. When you point out to them that the Socialist Labor Party, which has just received Lenin’s approval, has had a more radical program, and has had even less success, they brush the fact aside with contempt. What care they for facts? Let us have the tom-toms, and hysteria, and barricades in the streets.

There is a great deal of mysticism in this attitude — all fanatics are mystics — in this childish faith in the miraculous conversion of millions upon whom knowledge and wisdom are to descend suddenly from some unknown source, like a mysterious manna from heaven. They are to behold the glory of the cooperative commonwealth and the scales are to fall from their eyes.

The trouble with our revolutionary romanticists is that they either think in terms of some foreign country, or are ladies and gentlemen of leisure who never have had any actual connection with the American labor movement and know nothing about American working class and farming class psychology. They try to shape the workers and farmers of America to fit their theories, instead of fitting their theories to the American workers and farmers. Lenin never would have made that mistake. It isn't Russian *muzhiks*, with their communistic past, that we have to deal with in the United States, but the strongly individualistic American working and farming classes. And it is time for us to know whether here in the United States we are to adopt direct action, and are done with parliamentary methods and the ballot box.

The reason that the extremists hate the ballot box and parliamentary tactics is because they know they are the minority and have not the patience to await the test of discussion and time. They don't want the counting of noses, because they know the count will go against them, and because voting requires deliberation. They don't want deliberation, they want excitement and hysteria — Billy Sunday's method — and hope to carry their case on a wave of excitement.

Back of all this there always crops out the anarchistic contempt of majority rule. Like Ibsen, they believe that the majority of people are fools who have to be led by an "enlightened minority." They believe themselves to be the enlightened minority. Right now they would lead us into "mass action," street riots, to play into the capitalists' hands.

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