The Moscow Congress.

DOWN TO BRASS TACKS.

By S. P. BUNTING.

This year's congress has not been of a sensational character. There is something about it that reminds one of Lenin in his more recent moods; for that matter, Lenin as he has always been. Others may vent hot air, tub-thump, sway the sentimental crowd: he aims always at doing the right thing, avoiding error, pitfall or premature conflict, making sure of each step of ground before advancing further, and winning not so much a spectacular or dramatic success as a hold on the deepest convictions of the masses concerned. When others were for fighting the Kaiser again, he did what everyone later acknowledged to be the only thing to do, signed the Brest-Litovsk treaty. When others were for perpetuating "war communism" at any cost, he persuaded them that the necessary support of the peasantry required the "new economic policy." When the "infantile" pedants of the Left wanted to boycott parliaments and keep themselves unspotted from the world, he showed the necessity—quite apart from the "armed uprising" (a false quotation, of course), of which Detective Atkinson's Martial Law Commission has so much to say—of penetrating wherever you can get, at the workers, not boring like white ants to destroy, but to win over the majority, looking to mass pressure as the prime weapon. It is in that spirit that the Fourth Congress has been conducted. Thus, before anything else, party disputes in France, Czecho-Slovakia, and other countries have had to be smoothed out; the plodding tactic of the United Front has had to be so abundantly vindicated that no leg would be left for doubters to stand on; the revolutionary movement all over the world has had to be taught not to look for miracles or wait for "Lenin and Trotsky" to descend in a fiery chariot and bring off the revolution like an air-raid in Berlin, London, or—Johannesburg, but to cut the cackle and get to the 'osses, to redouble local agitation, propaganda, and organisation, however humdrum, until the majority of the workers, convinced at least of the failure of capitalism, become disposed to follow or at any rate acquiesce in a revolutionary lead. Can we not already trace the first rapid effects of such a policy on the British Parliamentary Labour Party—for in these days you don't have to plod long before you see results? The doctrines of the Fourth Congress have not been new. The purpose of the Congress has been to get them only more thoroughly applied in practice. Indeed, if all goes well but a critical situation is still postponed, it may be unnecessary to hold a Congress every year, especially as the new Constitution provides for frequent meetings of an "Enlarged Executive."

MEANING BUSINESS.

I have nothing to report, then, in the way of thrills. You in South Africa, with your huge funeral demonstrations of surging hate against bourgeois terror, and with Creswell choosing that occasion of all others to trim sails, have had more excitement than we in the Kremlin. To be frank, it may be "subjectively" piquant to hold proletarian congresses in the Tsarist halls of gilt and marble, but "objectively" the Kremlin Palace is not the ideal place. The acoustics are bad; and though it is true that whatever language happens to be used is foreign to two-thirds of the delegates, involving protracted translations in any case, still the whole proceedings would have been more effective if even the other one-third could always have heard properly. As it is, the less powerful factors, being accommodated towards the back, have been more or less out of earshot of the "tribune." Delegates used to fresh air, too, would have liked more ventilation than Russian ideas of winter permitted; a defect which in some circumstances might have considerable political importance! Lastly, it would be idle to deny that Lenin's non-appearance, except to make one speech, has had something of a subduing effect, even though we all know it must be so. Well, the enemy may try to make capital out of these details. I can see the "Times" talking of a "spiritless congress," "Third International on its last legs," etc. They are welcome to say the worst, it seems to comfort them. As a matter of fact, the C.I. is rather getting its proper sea legs for the first time. Without having been at any of the previous ones, I daresay the Congress has meant more real business and less mere show and excitement than any of its predecessors. Superstitious expectation of an immediate "Second Coming" has given place, as with those early Christians, to a more practical determination to conquer the world for the cause, with a juster and therefore more truly sanguine estimate both of the available revolutionary forces and of the extent of the revolutionary war-map. There has been, more than ever, a sense that the Communist International is at least all that the capitalist class fears in it a "conspiracy" (by the exploited majority) against the present social order, an enemy far more formidable than any "national foe" within the capitalist camp itself. The Congress feels itself to be the embryo of the coming proletarian "Parliament"—executive, not just deliberative—of the world. It has on its order of the day a more colossal task than any Genoa or Lausanne Conference. Those are just capitalist intrigues to devise means of tiding over and spoofing the masses until the next crisis. But the C.I. is out to build up solidly, unerringly, according to plan, and in the teeth of the capitalist world offensive, the world force which will serve not merely as a Defence Force but as an army of attack, and not merely as an army but as a World Executive of the will of a victorious working class.

CLOSING THE RANKS.

Thus the Congress, especially in "Commission," that is, sub-committee work, devotes the utmost attention to securing unity in every corps and every regiment of its political army. The tradition of earlier socialists which rather welcomed party divisions as "healthy" is absolutely barred at Moscow. Splits among class-conscious proletarian parties are objectively unfounded and cannot be tolerated. The whole weight of the Congress is brought to bear on eliminating them more and more, so that the C.I. may be not merely a bureau concerned with holding annual pitsos, but a single-minded executive body conducting the world campaign continuously, daily, on behalf of all its component parties, and through them as trusty local weapons. The leading men, for instance, have all been busy in committee straightening out tactical discussions in the ranks of one or another party, or within one or another country, which had been emboldening the enemy press to boast that in those countries at any rate a "Red Dusk" had set in. When we left, these "commissions" were succeeding beyond expectation, largely owing to the prestige due to the Executive's sound judgment, as against local parties, in the past; e.g., the Italian Maximalists, led by Serrati, now acknowledged that they were wrong, and the C.I. right, in 1920. And in the same harmonising spirit Zinovieff, in his reply to the debate on the Executive's report for 1921-2, cleared up various misconceptions on the United Front tactic and "Workers' Government" slogan—incidentally giving us for an hour or two one of the most masterly, brilliant, rapid and withal closely woven pieces of logical, critical, practical argument that I for one have ever heard.

THE CHIEFS.

I see, by the way, that Detective Sir Paul Dukes calls Zinovieff a "gutter demagogue." Just the one thing he is not. Low-grade men could not fill such positions, just as high-grade men could not be in the C.I.D. Trotzky (who spoke one day for 7½ hours on end, i.e., made his speech in three languages in succession), Zinovieff, Bukharin, Radek, Losofsky, and of course Lenin, although he was taking a less active part in the Congress this year, constitute a bunch of political genius in comparison with which the delegates of other countries, although including many of the leading men in their respective local labour movements, will I know readily forgive me for saying they seemed of quite mediocre calibre; a Big Six or so, making it easy to understand why the Communist Parties of the world are not merely content but well advised to "take orders from Moscow," in other words to elect these great Russians to their Executive. These men, though nearly all Russians, are elected and re-elected by the world parties because they are far and away the most able and trustworthy men in the whole labour movement, the men best qualified to direct the world-wide proletarian struggle for power, and, in the day when power shall have been won, to wield it in the name and on behalf of all the conquerors. That sense of confidence in the leaders, not hero-worship, but the result of seeing their work at the Congress, is one of the strongest impressions I carry away from Moscow. Of course, they also make mistakes, especially for lack of information, for there are far too few of them to master between them the problems of the whole world, requiring greater all-round up-to-date knowledge than Lloyd-George and all his secretariat could ever command. Indeed—so grossly is our Martial Law Commission in error in imagining that "Moscow takes a special interest in South Africa"—my chief regret is that during all the time I have been in Moscow the "Presidium," i.e., in effect this "Big Five," have never found time to discuss South African affairs either with me or without me; not, indeed, for want of interest, but because other matters are even more engrossing; delegates from countries with a bigger party and more immediate prospects are more important—Moscow soon takes the conceit out of a fellow! At the same time, having failed to get an audience with them, one feels that no one else is worth consulting!

THE POLITICALLY CHOSEN PEOPLE.

Undoubtedly the Marxian mantle to-day rests on Russia. Technically, industrially, in most respects culturally, or from the point of view of "business" efficiency among the most backward of European nations, the Russians are politically quite the most enlightened and advanced. You have only to compare the intelligence of a well-trained Communist Party member in Russia with the corresponding type elsewhere; or the keenness of the audience at a political meeting, and the high level of subject and treatment it exacts in Moscow with, say, that in London; the political talk of the man in the workshop at Petrograd and, say, at Chicago; the sound clean stuff in "Pravda" with the muck of divorce cases, racing and police news that goes to fill up even Labour papers in other lands. Granted, you may see half the population still crossing themselves whenever they pass within sight of any of Moscow's 1,600 churches, and inside these you may find men and women prostrate on their faces kissing the dirty floor: yet with all that they seem free from those far worse superstitions, the snobbery and servility to "rank" of a nation of shopkeepers, the shame at being a proletarian, the petty bourgeois' (and boozers') desire, if not to be taken for lords or masters, at least to ape their accent and conventional chatter, or else the flunkey's pride in the existing social hierarchy and accordingly his pride in any "proper station" therein, however menial, to which it may have pleased God to assign him—all these characteristics of millions of tame Britishers at any rate (I cannot speak with knowledge of others), they offend you every time you walk the streets of London and sometimes make you half despair of the revolution at "Home"; but you find hardly a trace of them among the masses in Moscow.

THE "NEGRO QUESTION."

It is this greater self-respect, this respect for the working class and contempt for bourgeoisdom, that has pre-eminently fitted the Russian Labour movement to take the leadership of an International which, unlike the Second, embraces not only Western Europeans but also Asiatics and Africans. One of the "diplomatic triumphs" of the Soviet Government is its success in turning towards itself as deliverer the eyes of all the oppressed, subjected or exploited nationalities of the East; and correspondingly, one of the achievements of the Communist International is the formation of Communist Parties, however small, accompanying the swift awakening of anti-imperialist and national feeling and the growth of working-class organisation during the last two years, in nearly every country in Asia. A permanent Committee at Moscow dealt with "Eastern and Colonial questions" comparatively and scientifically (though a little inclined to premature universalisation, a besetting sin and yet virtue of Russian political students inherited from days when all revolutionary point had to be buried under a mass of theoretic talky-talky. Well, the presence of two negro delegates at this year's Congress, as I mentioned in my last article, plus the interest in the awakening of the negro shown by white delegates from America, Holland, and South Africa, and also by delegates from Java, Japan, Egypt and Tunis, brought the "negro question" to the fore, though it had not been even contemplated on the agenda; and the Congress adopted, with perhaps less discussion than the subject deserved, a proposal which had already been mooted for some months before, to hold a Negro Congress at Moscow—something with more real emancipation about it than any of your Garvey or Dubois Conferences at New York, Paris, Brussels, or London. What ho! I can almost hear the Rand C.I.D. press screaming about "Bolshevist emissaries to foment revolution among kaffirs"—rather glass-house talk after recent revelations of Britain's fomenting activities in Greece. I shall write more fully on the subject another time: meanwhile I venture to think this policy of bringing the Toilers of Africa (and their American cousins), as the toilers of the Far East have already been brought, within the scope of the world revolutionary proletarian movement, is perhaps the most important piece of new ground covered, "new money," as it were, brought in at the Congress; a policy which it will be the task of, among others, our Party to further to the best of our ability.

THE "LOOK AT RUSSIA" ARGUMENT.

One point was made by more than one leading speaker at the Congress. Trotzky had suggested that whereas Russia suffered AFTER the proletarian revolution, in other countries the counter-revolution shows signs of exhausting itself BEFORE the working class takes power, leaving comparatively smooth waters for the revolutionary government to sail in thereafter. Again, in reply to those who point to the present admittedly poor plight of Russia as a triumphant warning against Communism, it had been urged that more advanced countries will avoid such a plight ensuing on their revolution. "Don't be too sure of that," said Zinovieff. "In other countries too the dictatorship of the proletariat may cause a famine." And in his same speech Trotzky, admitting that "we have not yet proved by facts that Socialism is a better economic method than Capitalism, for Russia is poorer than before the war and even than before the revolution," added: "Revolution as a method of economic transformation is a costly affair. . . The revolutionary conflicts that entail devastation simultaneously entail the birth of new epochs"—or rather vice versa. The conquest of capitalism is no picnic anywhere. To reach the Promised Land even the Chosen Race could not avoid forty years in the wilderness. It would be the worst propaganda to tell the workers of other countries that they are sure to escape the sufferings of Russia, and need not fear being called upon to pass through tortures or make sacrifices perhaps equal to or worse than Russia's, before they can definitely say they have established the New Order. Even in the best regulated households revolution is likely to be a "gruesome affair."

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I date this article on the day of our departure from the only free country in the world, although I shall post it in Darkest Bourgeoisland. We leave Moscow, as we expected, with great regrets and strong desires to return some day. And, having learnt something more than we knew before of the grave defects under which Soviet Russia is still labouring, we leave feeling more loyal to her than ever, more convinced than ever of the correctness of our Johannesburg banner—"Follow the lead of Soviet Russia."

P.S.—London, December 14. I see the "Times" comes out with a typical story of the train we travelled by being filled with 70 secret Bolshevik emissaries falsely travelling as diplomatic couriers. Seventeen would be nearer the actual number of passengers, and they consisted not of couriers but of ourselves and other delegates returning from the Congress! It is amusing to see with your own eyes the process of manufacturing lies about Russia!

Moscow, November 30, 1922.