The Crisis in Socialist Theory

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The “Group of International Communistes” in Holland

The first world war and the ensuing Russian and German revolutions raised new problems and brought about profound changes in the ideas of workers and Socialists. The German Socialist Party, the apparently powerful organisation ready to conquer political dominance and thereby to establish Socialism, when in power turned out a means for re-establishing capitalism. In Russia the workers had beaten down Czarism and taken possession of the factories and the land; now State Capitalism brought them into stricter slavery under a new master class. And not reformism only was to be blamed; the most notable spokesman of uncompromising radicalism, renowned as Marxists, such as Kautsky and Lenin, were agents in this development. Clearly there must be something wrong in the current doctrine.

The current doctrine was that the workers by ballot elect a Parliament and determine a Government of Socialists; then these politicians and officials have to do the essential work of expropriating the capitalists, of abolishing private ownership of the means of production, and of organising production. The ensuing system of public ownership, where the workers are wage-earners in service of the State, is entirely different from common ownership, where the workers are direct masters of the enterprises and regulate their work themselves. In the latter case the problem arises of how these enterprises can be combined into a well-planned social organisation. In fervent discussions, intense spiritual activity, the different leftist groups that had split off from the Socialist and the Communist Parties, tried to discover what other ways of action should lead the working class to the goal of freedom.

Political refugees to Holland who had taken part in the fight of the German workers, 1920-21 in the Ruhr rebellion and in that of the Saxonian plants, had experienced what a wealth of initiative and capacities sprang up in the masses when they stood before the task of organising themselves, their life and their fight. In Holland, owing to its situation in the midst of English, French, and German influences, fundamental theoretical understanding had penetrated into rather broad groups of workers and intellectuals. Out of their collaboration a group of militants, calling themselves “Group of International Communistes” (G.I.C.), came forward and set themselves to the study of the economic basis of the new society. They knew quite well that the workers’ revolution would not bring at once, as by miracle, a world of abundance where everybody had only to take according to his wishes. The new socialist order has to be built up in hard fight and deliberate work, by means of a well-devised organisation, according to strict rules of proletarian equity. Every form of society has its solid material basis in an economic system, a mode of production and distribution, that determines its structure and character. Already before but still more after the war many authors had occupied themselves with this economic problem (Kautsky, Hilferding, Neurath, Leichter, Max Weber, Cole, etc.), but they had all assumed as its base that a central leading power is necessary, a government that imposes its regulations upon the separate units of production. Anarchist writers, surely, had proclaimed the autonomy of the separate shops; but there the connection into a social organisation was left to goodwill only.

The G.I.C. in studying the problem, the main problem of Socialism, of how to combine freedom with organisation, perceived that they had only to continue along the lines of thought laid down by Marx in occasional small notes, in the Capital and in his remarks on the Gotha programme of the German S.D. Marx did not speak therein of State-socialism, which he opposed strongly, out of the association of free and equal producers, directing their work themselves; he pointed out that instead of value and money the “average time of production,” measured in hours of work, will form the basis of the new economic system. These ideas which the “Marxist” writers had entirely abandoned, were now worked out by the G.I.C. authors in an important booklet: Principles of Communist Production and Distribution that in 1930 appeared in German and in Dutch. There is shown that by the book-keeping of every enterprise, completed by registering and book-keeping of the processes of social production, on the basis of the hours spent, the workers are able themselves to supervise and direct production and distribution. Bodies of delegates, “workers’ councils” are the instruments in organising the separate enterprises into a social entirety. It is shown that this is not, simply a possible and better form than State-directed Socialism, but that it is the only possible form. It is not possible for a central bureaucracy of officials and experts to ascertain all needs, prescribe all the work and supervise all the processes in their details; all the proposed systems lead to arbitrariness in distribution by a ruling minority. Self-rule of the free and equal producers, on the one hand, is able to regulate production and distribution without difficulty, the rules and dealings being imposed by economic realities. The difficulties arise by interposing a State-power between production and consumption. Thus the aspirations of self-determination arising in the workers, from mere sentiment and political programme were turned into the embodiment of an economic necessity. Thus a scientific foundation was laid for the task of self-liberation of the working class.

It is to be regretted that this book was not accessible to English workers (the bulk of the German edition moreover was destroyed with the ascendancy of Nazism), because its practical basis could appeal strongly to the practical English mind. Now that Capitalism (Continued on page eight, column two)
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The book is now being published by the firm that first published the weekly London (formerly the Northern and Western Graduate) called the Northern Manufacturer. The weekly periodical now takes the name of Northern Manufacturer and is published by the same firm that published the weekly London. The weekly London was commenced in 1890 and is still in existence. The weekly manufacturer was commenced in 1891 and is still in existence.

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