

An article on concrete internationalism in times of war: Learn To Think - A Friendly Suggestion to Certain Ultra-Leftists

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Learn To Think

A Friendly Suggestion to Certain Ultra-Leftists

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CERTAIN PROFESSIONAL ultra-left phrase-mongers are attempting at all cost to “correct” the thesis of the Secretariat of the Fourth International on war in accordance with their own ossified prejudices. They especially attack that part of the thesis which states that in all imperialist countries the revolutionary party, while remaining in irreconcilable opposition to its own government in time of war, should, nevertheless, mold its practical politics in each country to the internal situation and to the international groupings, sharply differentiating a workers’ state from a bourgeois state, a colonial country from an imperialist country.

“The proletariat of a capitalist country which finds itself in an alliance with the USSR [1] [states the thesis] must retain fully and completely its irreconcilable hostility to the imperialist government of its own country. In this sense its policy will not differ from that of the proletariat in a country fighting against the USSR. But in the nature of practical actions considerable differences may arise depending on the concrete war situation.” (War and the Fourth International, p.21, § 44.)

The ultra-leftists consider this postulate, the correctness of which has been confirmed by the entire course of development, as the starting point of ... social-patriotism. [2] Since the attitude toward imperialist governments should be “the same” in all countries, these strategists ban any distinctions beyond the boundaries of their own imperialist country. Theoretically their mistake arises from an attempt to construct fundamentally different bases for war-time and peace-time policies.

Let us assume that rebellion breaks out tomorrow in the French colony of Algeria under the banner of national independence and that the Italian government, motivated by its own imperialist interests, prepares to send weapons to the rebels. What should the attitude of the Italian workers be in this case? I have purposely taken an example of rebellion against a democratic imperialism with intervention on the side of the rebels from a fascist imperialism. Should the Italian workers prevent the shipping of arms to the Algerians? Let any ultra-leftists dare answer this question in the affirmative. Every revolutionist, together with the Italian workers and the rebellious Algerians, would spurn such an answer with indignation. Even if a general maritime strike broke out in fascist Italy at the same time, even in this case the strikers should make an exception in favor of those ships carrying aid to the colonial slaves in revolt; otherwise they would be no more than wretched trade unionists – not proletarian revolutionists.

At the same time, the French maritime workers, even though not faced with any strike whatsoever, would be compelled to exert every effort to block the shipment of ammunition intended for use

against the rebels. Only such a policy on the part of the Italian and French workers constitutes the policy of revolutionary internationalism.

Does this not signify, however, that the Italian workers moderate their struggle in this case against the fascist regime? Not in the slightest. Fascism renders "aid" to the Algerians only in order to weaken its enemy, France, and to lay its rapacious hand on her colonies. The revolutionary Italian workers do not forget this for a single moment. They call upon the Algerians not to trust their treacherous "ally" and at the same time continue their own irreconcilable struggle against fascism, "the main enemy in their own country". Only in this way can they gain the confidence of the rebels, help the rebellion and strengthen their own revolutionary position.

If the above is correct in peace-time, why does it become false in war-time? Everyone knows the postulate of the famous German military theoretician, Clausewitz, that war is the continuation of politics by other means. This profound thought leads naturally to the conclusion that the struggle against war is but the continuation of the general proletarian struggle during peace-time. Does the proletariat in peace-time reject and sabotage all the acts and measures of the bourgeois government? Even during a strike which embraces an entire city, the workers take measures to insure the delivery of food to their own districts, make sure that they have water, that the hospitals do not suffer, etc. Such measures are dictated not by opportunism in relation to the bourgeoisie but by concern for the interests of the strike itself, by concern for the sympathy of the submerged city masses, etc. These elementary rules of proletarian strategy in peace-time retain full force in time of war as well.

An irreconcilable attitude against bourgeois militarism does not signify at all that the proletariat in all cases enters into a struggle against its own "national" army. At least the workers would not interfere with soldiers who are extinguishing a fire or rescuing drowning people during a flood; on the contrary, they would help side by side with the soldiers and fraternize with them. And the question is not exhausted merely by cases of elemental calamities. If the French fascists should make an attempt today at a coup d'état and the Daladier government found itself forced to move troops against the fascists, the revolutionary workers, while maintaining their complete political independence, would fight against the fascists alongside of these troops. Thus in a number of cases the workers are forced not only to permit and tolerate, but actively to support the practical measures of the bourgeois government.

In ninety cases out of a hundred the workers actually place a minus sign where the bourgeoisie places a plus sign. In ten cases however they are forced to fix the same sign as the bourgeoisie but with their own seal, in which is expressed their mistrust of the bourgeoisie. The policy of the proletariat is not at all automatically derived from the policy of the bourgeoisie, bearing only the opposite sign - this would make every sectarian a master strategist; no, the revolutionary party must each time orient itself independently in the internal as well as the external situation, arriving at those decisions which correspond best to the interests of the proletariat. This rule applies just as much to the war period as to the period of peace.

Let us imagine that in the next European war the Belgian proletariat conquers power sooner than the proletariat of France. Undoubtedly Hitler will try to crush the proletarian Belgium. In order to cover up its own flank, the French bourgeois government might find itself compelled to help the Belgian workers' government with arms. The Belgian Soviets of course reach for these arms with both hands. But actuated by the principle of defeatism, perhaps the French workers ought to block their bourgeoisie from shipping arms to proletarian Belgium? Only direct traitors or out-and-out idiots can reason thus.

The French bourgeoisie could send arms to proletarian Belgium only out of fear of the greatest

military danger and only in expectation of later crushing the proletarian revolution with their own weapons. To the French workers, on the contrary, proletarian Belgium is the greatest support in the struggle against their own bourgeoisie. The outcome of the struggle would be decided, in the final analysis, by the relationship of forces, into which correct policies enter as a very important factor. The revolutionary party's first task is to utilize the contradiction between two imperialist countries, France and Germany, in order to save proletarian Belgium.

Ultra-left scholastics think not in concrete terms but in empty abstractions. They have transformed the idea of defeatism into such a vacuum. They can see vividly neither the process of war nor the process of revolution. They seek a hermetically sealed formula which excludes fresh air. But a formula of this kind can offer no orientation for the proletarian vanguard.

To carry the class struggle to its highest form - civil war - this is the task of defeatism. But this task can be solved only through the revolutionary mobilization of the masses, that is, by widening, deepening, and sharpening those revolutionary methods which constitute the content of class struggle in "peace"-time. The proletarian party does not resort to artificial methods, such as burning warehouses, setting off bombs, wrecking trains, etc., in order to bring about the defeat of its own government. Even if it were successful on this road, the military defeat would not at all lead to revolutionary success, a success which can be assured only by the independent movement of the proletariat. Revolutionary defeatism signifies only that in its class struggle the proletarian party does not stop at any "patriotic" considerations, since defeat of its own imperialist government, brought about, or hastened by the revolutionary movement of the masses is an incomparably lesser evil than victory gained at the price of national unity, that is, the political prostration of the proletariat. Therein lies the complete meaning of defeatism and this meaning is entirely sufficient.

The methods of struggle change, of course, when the struggle enters the openly revolutionary phase. Civil war is a war, and in this aspect has its particular laws. In civil war, bombing of warehouses, wrecking of trains and all other forms of military "sabotage" are inevitable. Their appropriateness is decided by purely military considerations - civil war continues revolutionary politics but by other, precisely, military means.

However during an imperialist war there may be cases where a revolutionary party will be forced to resort to military-technical means, though they do not as yet follow directly from the revolutionary movement in their own country. Thus, if it is a question of sending arms or troops against a workers' government or a rebellious colony, not only such methods as boycott and strike, but direct military sabotage may become entirely practical and obligatory. Resorting or not resorting to such measures will be a matter of practical possibilities. If the Belgian workers, conquering power in war-time, have their own military agents on German soil, it would be the duty of these agents not to hesitate at any technical means in order to stop Hitler's troops. It is absolutely clear that the revolutionary German workers also are duty-bound (if they are able) to perform this task in the interests of the Belgian revolution, irrespective of the general course of the revolutionary movement in Germany itself.

Defeatist policy, that is, the policy of irreconcilable class struggle in war-time cannot consequently be "the same" in all countries, just as the policy of the proletariat cannot be the same in peacetime. Only the Comintern of the epigones has established a regime in which the parties of all countries break into march simultaneously with the left foot. In struggle against this bureaucratic cretinism we have attempted more than once to prove that the general principles and tasks must be realized in each country in accordance with its internal and external conditions. This principle retains its complete force for war-time as well.

Those ultra-leftists who do not want to think as Marxists, that is, concretely, will be caught unawares by war. Their policy in time of war will be a fatal crowning of their policy in peace-time. The first

artillery shots will either blow the ultra-leftists into political non-existence, or else drive them into the camp of social-patriotism, exactly like the Spanish anarchists, who, absolute “deniers” of the state, found themselves from the same causes bourgeois ministers when war came. In order to carry on a correct policy in war-time one must learn to think correctly in tune of peace.

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P.S.

* Written on 22 May 1938.. Source: New International, Vol.4 No.7, July 1938, pp.206-207.

Electronic version:

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1938/05/think.htm>

* Transcription/Mark-up: Einde O’Callaghan for the Trotsky Internet Archive.

Footnotes

[1] We can leave aside then the question of the class character of the USSR. We are interested in the question of policy in relation to a workers’ state in general or to a colonial country fighting for its independence. So far as the class nature of the USSR is concerned we can incidentally recommend to the ultra-leftists that they gaze upon themselves in the mirror of A. Ciliga’s book, In the Country of the Big Lie. This ultra-left author, completely lacking any Marxist schooling, pursues his idea to the very end, that is, to liberal-anarchic abstraction.

[2] Mrs. Simone Weil even writes that our position is the same as Plekhanov’s in 1914-1918. Simone Weil, of course, has a right to understand nothing. Yet it is not necessary to abuse this right.