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Review: Third Comintern Congress (1921) Revisited

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Review: *To The Masses: Proceedings of the Third Congress of the Communist International, 1921*. Edited and translated by John Riddell. Brill, 2015, 1299 pages, \$517 hardcover.

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IN LATE JUNE 1921, the Third Congress of the Communist International convened amidst great confusion and contradictory impulses within the international workers' movement.

Soviet Russia had just emerged victorious from a protracted civil war against imperialist-sponsored forces of reaction. In the wake of this victory, however, the Communist Party had introduced the New Economic Policy, granting limited concessions to foreign capitalists and reintroducing elements of a capitalist economy into the workers' state. The Communist government had also been forced to violently suppress an armed uprising by sailors at Kronstadt (once a bulwark of support for the October revolution) who had rallied around the call for "soviets without Communists."

Internationally, many Communist parties had seen dramatic growth, due in large part to processes of splits and fusions with left-wing elements of the pre-war Social Democratic parties. The French Socialist Party had voted by a majority to affiliate to the Comintern, changing its name to the Communist Party in the process.

In Germany the left wing of Karl Kautsky's Independent Social-Democratic Party (USPD) joined with the Communist Party of Germany (Spartacus) — which, despite its strong revolutionary pedigree, had hitherto exerted limited influence on the workers' movement and largely functioned as a propaganda group — to found the United Communist Party of Germany (VKPD), a mass party.

In Czechoslovakia, Bohumir Šmeral, previously a pro-war Social-Democrat, now stood at the head of a large Communist Party which showed great promise.

Meanwhile, the Italian Socialist Party, provisionally admitted to the Comintern the year before, suffered a split as Giacinto Serrati, leader of a pro-Communist majority, refused to expel the

reformist right wing and fully implement the Twenty-One Conditions passed at the Comintern's Second Congress. Neither the Socialist Party nor the fledgling Communist Party were capable of taking the lead when a movement of factory occupations swept northern Italy; with the defeat of that movement, Fascism swept into power.

After the expulsion of the inconsistently revolutionary, or centrist, Serrati and his supporters, many on the left wing of the Comintern smelled blood in the water. Egged on by exiled leader of the Hungarian Soviet Republic Bela Kun, the German party majority had taken premature insurrectionary action in March 1921, which resulted in brutal repression and was criticized by leading party spokespeople Paul Levi and Clara Zetkin as a grave error.

Sharp Political Struggle

The Third Congress saw a robust struggle. Lenin and Trotsky, the most prominent figures in the Comintern's leadership, came out decisively on the right wing of the Congress, though this in itself was far from sufficient to temper the adventurist and sectarian tendencies represented by the left.

Lenin in particular devoted a great deal of time and energy to winning delegates over to his positions; while much of this work was outside the plenary sessions of the Congress, John Riddell has done an admirable job of assembling an appendix of archival documents which flesh out the story of the Third Congress from behind the scenes.

While confirming the expulsion of the Italian Socialist Party majority, and of Levi for violating party discipline, the Third Congress vindicated the sober revolutionary political course advocated by Levi and Zetkin in the VKPD, and rejected the drive to pursue an ongoing witch-hunt against centrists in all the parties of the Comintern. In concluding his report on tactics and strategy, Karl Radek said:

"The Communist International, which arose as a broad organization of struggle of the revolutionary proletariat against the falsification and betrayal of socialism by the right-wing socialists, does not need to defend itself against the charge that it has right-wing leanings. . . Opportunism seeks to avoid the final goal, which is distant. Radical revolutionism tries to leap over the obstacles. The mother of both these deviations is impatience. . . And precisely because we have deep confidence in the advance of world revolution, because we have confidence that we will soon see the formation of broad mass parties, we tell you not to demand of today what only tomorrow can bring, but rather to do each day the work that this day demands." (443-44)

A major outcome of the Congress was to acknowledge the importance of winning the majority of the working class in each country for Communism, without which state power, even if won, could not be held. In this spirit, the "open letter" of the VKPD leadership to other German working-class organizations was endorsed as a model for Communist parties to emulate; this formed the basis for the "united front" policy that would be formulated in greater detail at the Fourth Congress the following year.

To The Masses: Proceedings of the Third Congress of the Communist International, 1921 continues a decades-long project by editor/translator John Riddell to document the early years of the Comintern. Between 1984 and 1993, Pathfinder Press published six volumes edited by Riddell covering the first and second congresses of the Comintern, as well as key documents from the period leading up to its founding and the proceedings of the 1920 Baku Congress of Peoples of the East.

The project resumed in 2011 with the publication of the proceedings of the Comintern's Fourth Congress (reviewed by this author in the May-June 2014 issue of *Against the Current*) by Dutch

publishing house Brill and Haymarket Press in the United States.

With *To The Masses*, also published by Brill, Riddell has completed the task of publishing the proceedings of the Comintern congresses through the time of Lenin's death in 1924. Riddell promises at least one further volume under the editorship of Mike Taber covering three expanded sessions of the Executive Committee of the Comintern (ECCI) taking place from 1922 through 1923.

The Levi Affair

Paul Levi, a veteran of the German SPD who during the First World War joined the revolutionary Spartacus group led by Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, was a founding member of the German Communist Party in 1918 and the Party's chair from 1919. His exceptional qualities as a revolutionary theoretician did not go unnoticed by Lenin or other leaders of the international Communist movement.

Together with Karl Radek, Levi drafted the Open Letter to German Workers' Organizations, published in *Die Rote Fahne* (the VKPD's newspaper) on January 8, 1921 (the Open Letter is also included in the appendices to *To The Masses*, 1061-1063). The Open Letter was an appeal to the leaderships of other workers' organizations to come together in a united struggle for measures to improve the "unbearable conditions" confronting the German proletariat.

The letter called for struggle for a number of measures, both to provide for the basics of life and to confront the desperate political situation in Germany, marked by rightwing putsches, bourgeois paramilitary groups and widespread violent repression of working-class movements.

The demands of the Open Letter spoke to the aspirations of reformist as well as revolutionary workers, though they pushed beyond the boundaries of what reformism alone could accomplish. They were thus an inherent threat to the bureaucratic, class collaborationist approach of the reformist workers' parties and trade union leaderships, who greeted the letter with great suspicion.

The call for united struggle was also rejected out of hand by the leadership of the small, ultraleft Communist Workers' Party of Germany (KAPD), who condemned the letter as opportunist. While the Open Letter was not met with open revolt from the left wing of the VKPD, circumstances soon pushed Levi and the Open Letter policy to the margins.

In February 1921, Levi resigned as chair of the VKPD in protest over the expulsion of Serrati and the Italian Socialist Party from the Comintern; Clara Zetkin and three of their supporters joined Levi in resigning from the party's leadership. Writes Riddell in his introduction, "A new team took the helm, including Meyer, Thalheimer, Eberlein, and Brandler, determined to steer the German Party toward bolder initiatives in action. . . While the new leadership struggled to turn the party onto a more radical course, at about the beginning of March, an unanticipated and unusually authoritative ECCI delegation arrived in Berlin." (16)

The ECCI delegation included Bela Kun as well as József Pogány (who later in the decade became notorious in the annals of the U.S. Communist Party under the pseudonym John Pepper) and August Guralsky. Though it is unclear on whose authority they were sent to Berlin, the presence of Kun was enough to lend the delegation a sufficient degree of prestige to reshape VKPD policy according to their whims.

Levi and Zetkin both later alleged that Kun had urged the German party leadership to take bold action to overthrow the government so as to break Soviet Russia out of her isolation, arguing that as

a party of half a million members, even if still a minority in the German workers' movement, the VKPD was now large enough to carry out a revolution. In a letter to Lenin on May 6, Kun largely confirms Levi and Zetkin's account of these conversations:

"First of all, here is what I actually told Levi: Soviet Russia is in great peril. . . When you consider what it would mean if the absence of the world revolution causes Soviet Russia to fall in two years, you must reorient your line of march in order to break through the counterrevolutionary front. Do not wait, standing on the defensive, while the bourgeoisie strangles the proletariat through capitalist restoration. . . I described the situation in Russia to [Zetkin] more frankly and in stronger terms than I had to Levi." (1088-1089)

Kun's intervention provided the stimulus for the abortive March Action, which resulted in the deaths of 150 VKPD members as well as 4,000 prison sentences, including eight sentences to life imprisonment and four death sentences. Thousands more lost their jobs, and the VKPD suffered loss of influence in the workers' movement.

Riddell writes that "distrust of the VKPD was now widespread even among radical non-Communist workers." (21) Levi, exasperated by the foolishness of this political course and the attempts to generalize it into a "theory of the offensive," published a pamphlet by a non-party press criticizing the March Action.

The publication of Levi's *Our Path: Against Putschism* on April 12 resulted in his expulsion from the VKPD three days later. Levi's pamphlet gave the VKPD majority fresh ammunition to condemn their critics as traitors to the Party and push the "theory of the offensive" as the way forward globally for the revolution.

While acknowledging the necessity of a short-term expulsion for breach of discipline, Lenin remained sympathetic to Levi and his arguments and urged the VKPD to make an effort to reintegrate Levi into the Party and its leadership bodies after a period of several months, as soon as he could once again prove himself worthy of the Party's trust. Meanwhile, Levi and Zetkin's political line was by and large vindicated by the Third Congress; the theory of the offensive suffered a resounding defeat.

To help the left wing save face and forge a new unity between the VKPD right represented by Zetkin, and the left represented by Thalheimer, Brandler et al, the March Action was rebranded in the annals of the Comintern as a defensive campaign; the VKPD had supposedly been forced into action and fought heroically despite their ultimate defeat.

Despite Lenin's overtures, Levi did not seek readmission into the VKPD. He went on to become a leader of a left current within the Independent Social-Democratic Party (USPD), which merged with the SPD in 1922. With the defeat of the March Action, the VKPD's hopes of building a genuinely mass revolutionary party in Germany were dealt a massive blow.

The Trade Union Question

Of particular interest at the Third Congress was the discussion on activity within the trade unions. Concurrently with the Third Congress, the first congress of the Red International of Labor Unions (RILU, or Profintern) was being held in Moscow. Discussion of the trade union question at the Third Congress presumably represents something of a distillation of the discussion that took place at the Profintern congress, though this reviewer for one would be delighted to see the proceedings of the latter published in full as a future volume in this series.

The trade union discussion gave expression to two significant debates on the left wing of the labor movement: the relationship of the Communist movement to syndicalism, and whether revolutionaries should work within the existing trade unions despite their reactionary leaderships, or strive to build new, revolutionary unions.

The Amiens Charter, adopted by the French union federation CGT in 1906, was widely regarded as a defining document of the syndicalist movement, which enjoyed great influence among Communists and other radicals in France. While welcoming all militant workers regardless of political affiliation, the Amiens Charter insisted in turn that all agitation in favor of any political perspective be left outside of the unions.

In his opening presentation on the Trade Union question, Zinoviev argued that Communists must be clear in opposing the “neutrality” expressed in Amiens Charter. “When the question of — for example — calling up the conscripts comes up, trade unionists cannot just say, ‘That does not concern me. It is a political question, so I will remain neutral.’ For a trade unionist to make such a statement would be counterrevolutionary. . . Now, after the war, class antagonisms have become so acute that there is hardly a single significant question before the working class that is not simultaneously political and economic. Neutrality is a phantom, a fantasy, and not reality.” (608)

Zinoviev went on to insist on the importance of Communists organizing themselves and acting in a coordinated manner within the trade unions, to struggle to win a majority within the unions for Communist ideas. This was the prevailing position at the Comintern Congress, but was contested by the German KAPD, which participated in the Third Congress as a sympathizing section. (The KAPD left the Comintern months later, refusing to accept the Third Congress’s mandate that they merge with the VKPD.)

The KAPD hailed the slogan “out of the trade unions!” briefly advocated by the Spartacus League in response to the union leaderships’ wartime betrayals. (642) KAPD delegate Bergmann argued that “the Communists’ slogan must be not to win over the trade unions but to destroy them and, simultaneously, to build new organizations.”

He gave as an example the General Workers’ Union of Germany (AAUD), an organization “which works closely with the KAPD. . . The AAUD rejects wholesale the methods of struggle previously practiced in the trade unions. The AAUD statutes specify as a precondition of membership in the factory organization that the member must support the dictatorship of the proletariat. . . members must reject the old rotted-out weapon of political action, namely participation in parliamentary elections. Out of its ranks. . . it creates the councils that will be the organs of exercising power when the day of struggle comes. On that day, the masses of the proletariat will support these organizations.” (643)

The KAPD position found little resonance among other delegates at the Congress. The question of dual unionism was nevertheless the subject of a more spirited debate in the context of the United States labor movement, where the Industrial Workers of the World had deep roots in the traditions of labor radicalism, while the mainstream labor bureaucracy, headed by Samuel Gompers, had a particularly reactionary character.

William D. “Big Bill” Haywood, who had been a prominent leader of the IWW before seeking political refuge in Soviet Russia, spoke as a member of the ECCI in passionate defense of the IWW, which he feared the U.S. Communist Party sought to liquidate. Several speakers from the United States and Canada spoke with similar fervor both in favor and opposition to the IWW. Some speakers criticized the IWW for allowing anti-communist tracts to appear in its publications and dismissed it as having little influence on North American workers since the end of the First World War, as evidenced by its

dwindling dues base.

Ultimately, however, the Congress took a conciliatory if slightly condescending stance toward the IWW, as expressed in the Theses on the Communist International and the Red International of Labor Unions: "By no means should the Communists simply leave the ranks of the reactionary [American] Federation of Labor. On the contrary, they should try by every means to win the old unions to revolution. Cooperation with the best sectors of the IWW is necessary, but it should not preclude an educational effort to counter the IWW's prejudices." (958)

Gaps Between Theory and Practice

Along with the Third Congress of the Comintern and RILU congress, the Second International Conference of Communist Women was also held in Moscow from June 9 through 15, 1921. While the Third Congress voted on an excellent set of theses and two resolutions on Communist work among women, discussion on this question was sorely lacking — only half a session was devoted to the women's movement.

After a presentation by Clara Zetkin, only two speakers, Alexandra Kollontai and French delegate Lucie Colliard, took the floor. The lack of time given to this question, and a rather misogynistic remark by Karl Radek in another session that evidently went unchallenged, are testament that the international Communist movement, although theoretically quite advanced on the question of women's liberation, was still struggling to overcome a rather large and unfortunate gap between theory and practice.

Discussion of the national question was also sorely lacking. An inordinate amount of the brief time allotted for discussion was ceded to a representative of the Union of Islamic Revolutionary Societies. A footnote clarifies that this organization was founded by Enver Pasha, a leader of the Young Turk revolution and an Ottoman Empire government official during the First World War. While in exile in 1920, he declared his solidarity with the Soviet government, but soon after the Third Congress he broke with Soviet Russia and "joined an anti-Soviet revolt in Central Asia." (843)

A handful of brief reports from Communist delegates from across the Asian continent follow, and while these are not without interest, there was no serious attempt to generalize these experiences or develop a strategic perspective to guide the Comintern's work in the Third World. More disturbing is the fact that, to save time, a decision was made to forgo translation of reports on this question.

Indian delegate M.N. Roy protested that he was only given five minutes for a report:

"Since the topic could not be exhausted even in an hour, I will use these five minutes to launch an energetic protest.

"The way that the Eastern question has been handled at this congress is purely opportunistic and more appropriate for a congress of the Second International. It is impossible to reach any specific conclusions in the few comments that delegates from the East are permitted to make. . . .

"Finally, yesterday, there was a session of the commission, but it presented a very pathetic spectacle. Not a single representative of the European and American delegations was present. Because of the confusion attending the congress, the commission had not been constituted. It decided not to adopt any theoretical resolution on the Eastern question. This decision is absolutely incorrect and should not be allowed to stand. I therefore call on the congress to refer the Eastern question to a constituted commission and give it the serious treatment it deserves." (855-856)

Vasil Kolarov, the chair of the session, defended the Congress's handling of the Eastern question, "because the question was already dealt with thoroughly at the Second Congress of the Comintern. . . This question was also up for discussion at the Congress of the Peoples of the East, which took place in August last year. I am convinced that it will also be dealt with in future congresses and other gatherings." (870)

Indeed, the Eastern Question was given more attention at the Fourth Congress the following year. Unfortunately, the reluctance of many Communists to devote serious attention to the question remained a real issue which would have serious consequences for Communist struggles in China and elsewhere in the years and decades to come.

Conclusion

The Third Congress of the Communist International was a significant moment, in which the young Communist movement outgrew the "infantile" tendencies toward adventurist putsches and came to prioritize building mass revolutionary struggle over insisting on ideological purity.

The policy of the United Front and the concept of transitional demands were expressed in embryo in the Third Congress's Theses on Tactics and Strategy, and the importance of winning the majority of the working class of each country was made explicit. In speaking to Communist youth soon after the congress's conclusion, Leon Trotsky referred to the Third Congress as "The highest school of revolutionary strategy." (46)

The lessons of the Third Congress remain well worth study by revolutionary socialist activists today. With *To The Masses*, John Riddell has once again done a great service to revolutionary Marxists and historians of the international Communist movement.

Beyond the work of translating the text of the proceedings and resolutions, Riddell's work in assembling the 140 pages of appendices and other supplementary materials is truly commendable; the appendices could easily stand alone as a separate volume.

The most unfortunate thing about this volume is the price — at €399 or \$517, the hardcover edition is for now prohibitively expensive for most interested individuals; those without access to an academic library will have to hope for the publication of a more affordable paperback or electronic edition in the near future.

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P.S.

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