

WANTED: The MARXISM of MARX!

We are in entire agreement with the writer of this article in his plea for a re-discussion of the fundamental principles of our teaching—which does not of course mean that we agree entirely with everything he says. Next month we hope to publish some replies from Plebs and N.C.L.C workers.

THE storm raging throughout the revolutionary movement of this country on the question of Marxist education has reached a stage when it seems advisable to call attention to the fact that what we are witnessing is not simply a clash of personalities. It is symptomatic of the condition of the whole revolutionary movement here, indicating a profound process of adjustment and orientation arising from new experiences and new demands.

We have entered the revolutionary epoch. Vast movements have within the last five years shaken the old order to its foundations, torn great gaps in its superstructure and upset the calculations of the theoreticians of old schools and new. Although the revolutionary movement of this country, B.S.P., S.L.P., Shop Stewards, Plebs League and other organisations declared at once their solidarity with the Russian Revolution and hailed it as the beginning of the world revolution, no one can say that the programme and policy of any one of these organisations were equal to the implications of the revolution. Their response to the revolution was the instinctive response of revolutionists to its elemental force rather than the confirmation and fulfilment of a policy they had been consciously pursuing.

From that time onward the movement has been struggling to catch up with history. The volition of the revolution was tremendous. We heard all kinds of cries. "To hell with education!" "Don't worry about organisation." "Action is the thing." "The movement will produce the man, the organisation, and the clarity of vision." These were great days, full of the zest of life and the underlying impulse behind the impulse to bang the class-room doors was sound. When the same surging movement comes again, then again the place of every revolutionist worth his salt will be in the front of the actual battle. There is a time for training as well as for fighting, even though we learn by fighting. This we are discovering through experience. The development of the world revolution proved to be a much greater thing than we had dreamed,

The power and capacity for resistance of the capitalist state proved to be something which could not be overcome without long preparation.

It has become increasingly clear that whilst the direction of forces is one thing, and is clearly discernible, the *tempo* of the movement of these forces is another. Waves of revolutionary fervour sweep the masses forward, they recede, they come again, until the cumulative power generated by successive experiences carries the workers to their final triumph.

All these things are now written across the pages of contemporary history. We have rushed forward, retreated, and now again appear to be at the beginning of a new upward sweep of revolutionary fervour. But we have not yet assimilated these recent experiences and translated their lessons into all departments of our revolutionary activity, though life is hammering hard at us to make haste.

The theoretical equipment of the English-speaking countries has never been much to boast about. Its revolutionary literature is very meagre. The extent to which events themselves have shattered the main tenets which we held prior to the Russian revolution indicates the vastness of the change which the movement is undergoing. "The most advanced countries in capitalism will be the first to make the revolution." This was the basis upon which the most revolutionary sections built their theories, and they looked to America to lead the way. And the route—the ballot box plus industrial might. Those who were not parliamentarians in the reformist sense stressed industrial organisation and leaned towards the theory of the growth of workers' industrial organisations to such dimensions that they would emerge out of capitalism much as the butterfly emerges from the chrysalis. The educational curriculum consisted of a knowledge of evolution, primitive society, Marxian economics, industrial history, and the modern working-class movement.

How vast has been the shattering of our old equipment a little reflection will make clear. Russia made the proletarian revolution first. The manner and form of the revolution are totally different to all our previous conceptions. The revolution spreads west and east, new international organisations are thrown up, peoples held down for generations by imperial powers respond to the reverberations of the revolution. The actualities of the revolutionary epoch make us laugh at what we once thought were revolutionary theories. And yet we called our theories Marxism, and the leaders of the revolution declare and prove Marxian theory true to the actualities of revolution.

It would be interesting to trace the contradictions to their origin step by step, but sufficient for the moment if we can diagnose what's

wrong. Marxian teaching has suffered many interpretations at different periods, and the fundamental difference in the nature of these periods will give the key to the situation. The *Communist Manifesto* of 1847 and the foundations of Marxism were laid in the midst of a revolutionary period. It was followed by a long period of imperialist expansion and capitalist development wherein the working class of Europe became adapted to imperialism and reaped the advantages from the exploitation of subject peoples. During this period the working-class movement and its organisations grew in size and power and apparently gave substance to the idea of the new society growing within the womb of the old ; destined to emerge by moving onward from precedent to precedent. It was in this latter period that all our theoretical armoury was forged and our revolutionary organisations had their birth. We were in a wonderful period of mechanical development and our theories were mechanical theories. The mechanics of capitalism obscured the dynamics of the class struggle. We talked of the class struggle, but thought of it mechanically, counting heads by ballot papers, weaving forms of organisation, explaining the commodity theory, explaining the economic interest of imperialists, talking of the materialist conception of history, always dealing with abstractions ; never the actual class struggle and how to wage it.

The whole movement was permeated with these theories. The revolutionist addressing the unemployed would give a long historical dissertation on crises and the impossibility of solving the unemployed problem under capitalism. Addressing the strikers, he would deliver a chunk of De Leon's *What Means This Strike ?* and tell them that until they had industrial unionism they could not hope to win. The more moderate would advise them to vote Labour and amalgamate their unions into industrial unions. These were the concrete results of the educational and political work of the period.

1917 knocked the bottom out of the "Marxism" of this period. It ushered us into the revolutionary epoch of the twentieth century and threw into relief the Marxism of the revolutionary period crystallised and enriched by the experience and thought of the leaders of the Russian revolution. It is the inrush of ideas and light from the revolution rushing up against the custodians of the past that has created the theoretical and political storms within the ranks of every phase of the revolutionary movement.

The Plebs League and the Labour Colleges cannot hope to escape the storms, and attacks upon types of education should be distinguished from attacks upon the institutions. These organisations have been the custodians of Marxian education. It has been their proud boast that they were such, and they must perforce be

profoundly affected by the changes which life demands. They have been the custodians of the Marxism of the epoch of imperialist expansion, and the defect of this theory and its fundamental errors are clear.

Plebs assert that the fact of the Class Struggle is the fundamental justification for independent working-class education. It is upon this plank that we have fought the W.E.A.

Plebs stand for workers' control of education. But it needs more than workers' control of education to ensure it being other than W.E.A. education in character.

Plebs have declared that education is for a purpose and that purpose the emancipation of the workers.

The Plebs pamphlet, *What is Independent Working Class Education?* concludes as follows :—

We shall test the value of all our studies by the simple question : " Do they help to fit us to play a more useful part in the work immediately in front of us—the liberation of our class from oppression and exploitation ? " Only as a means to that end does education concern us.

These premises and these tests are important.

Is it helping the workers to " play a more useful part," to make fighters, and to equip them with an education which leaves them to fall into the same pitfalls as the previous generation ?

What " certain fundamental *elementary* principles " do you propose to get across ? Merely the *fact* of the class struggle, and never a single suggestion as to *how* the workers are to wage the struggle ? No mention of what are the fundamental and elementary requirements of victory in the struggle ? Shall we spend months unravelling the Theory of Value, and never mention the elementary fact that the workers must have a revolutionary workers' party—lest we be accused of party politics ?

Shall we spread out the world before the workers on maps, indicate its wonderful resources and the network of capitalist interests which control it ; tell them of the evolution of man through the ages ; tell them of complex systems of ancient society, and of the intricacies of modern finance, and never a word about the " fundamental elementary " fact that emancipation is impossible without the conquest of power ?

Shall we tell them of the evolution of Trades Unionism to Industrial Unionism and never a word about their saturation with Imperialism ?

These are the kind of fundamental test questions which are knocking at the doors of every college and every class claiming to teach Marxism.

The revolution has blown to smithereens the pedantic formalism of the so-called Marxian theorists of the epoch of the Second

International. We are now faced with the challenge to give the revolution full play within the institutions of the working class and bring the Marxism of Marx to bear upon its problems, which means that the class struggle is the key to the interpretation of the educational needs of the workers. Without it there is no justification for independent working-class education, no justification for the existence of the Plebs and the Labour Colleges, and no fulfilment of the published aims and tests of these organisations.

[Real Marxist education shows *why* there is a class struggle, *the character* of the class struggle, *how to wage* the class struggle, and *how to end* the class struggle. These are the fundamental elementary things we *must* "get across."

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