

## Chapter VIII

### SOVIETS OR PARLIAMENT?

The Manifesto of the Executive Committee of the Communist International issued on September 18, 1919, proclaims that: "The *general* unifying program at the present moment is the recognition of the struggle for the dictatorship of the proletariat *in the form of Soviet power.*" (Italics mine.)

The Platform-Resolution of the Second Congress of the Communist International characterizes the Soviet as "the principal form of the dictatorship of the proletariat furnished by history," and declares that "the Proletarian revolution in Russia has brought to the foreground the *basic* form of labor dictatorship, viz., the *Soviet.*" (Italics mine.)

In his "Program of the Communists," Bukharin writes:

"Up to the present time, up to the Russian Revolution of 1917, much has been written about the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. But no one knew, exactly, how the dictatorship would be realized. The Russian Revolution shows the form the dictatorship will take: *this form is the Soviet republic.* For this reason the ad-

vance guard of the International proletariat is inscribing on its banners the slogan: A Soviet Republic, all power to the Soviets. For this reason our problem is the formation of a Soviet power *the world over.*"<sup>1</sup> (Italics mine.)

And again:

"Above all, the Russian Revolution solved the question of the form of the dictatorship. It solved the question as to what should constitute the power of the proletarian state. The Soviets, the Soviet power—that is the form which was born of our Revolution. In the beginning, one could still think, perhaps, that the Soviets were a specifically Russian product. But the further experiences of Western Europe showed that this was the *general form rooted in the fundamental conditions of the war of the working class against the bourgeoisie.* And it is for just that reason that all who advocate the dictatorship of the proletariat must support the Soviet power."<sup>2</sup> (Italics mine.)

Zinovieff, speaking at the Halle convention of the Independent Socialists of Germany, as late as October, 1920, expresses the same thought with equal vigor:

"Mere lip services in favor of the dictatorship of the proletariat," he says, "we hear often enough. But was it not Crispian who declared in Moscow, speaking

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<sup>1</sup> Page 25.

<sup>2</sup> From Article: "What is New in the Russian Revolution," *Soviet Russia Magazine*, N. Y., February 12, 1921.

to Lenin: "Well, is the dictatorship anything new? Or was it already set forth in the Erfurt Programme?"

\* \* \* A dictatorship of the proletariat in the sense of the Erfurt Programme means nothing. \* \* \* A dictatorship in that sense will, of course, be supported by all Mensheviks. But now the question is about the incarnate dictatorship of the proletariat, about the form, which we have not sucked from our fingers, but about *the historic form of the dictatorship of the proletariat that the international working class has created, i. e., about the Soviets.*"

And while he seems to qualify the assertion by the succeeding sentence: "If the German working class will create another form, we shall acclaim it with joy, for we have always said everything must not be as it is in Russia and the workers in other countries will perhaps do better than we," the statement must be interpreted as a challenge rather than a concession, for he adds immediately: "But up till now the Soviet government is the historically developed form of the dictatorship of the proletariat."<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, Lenin in his "Letter to American Workingmen" (New York, 1918) describes the Soviet as "a *particular* form of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat," and the Executive Committee of the Communist International in its Reply to the Independent

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<sup>3</sup>"U. S. P. D. Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des außerordentlichen Parteitages in Halle," Berlin, 1920, page 155.

Labor Party of England takes a somewhat non-committal stand on the subject.

“Our English comrades,” they say, “in their sixth question wish to know what other forms of Soviet government are possible in other countries. We can say nothing definite. It is necessary to admit theoretically the possibility of variations of forms depending upon the varying economic structures of the different countries in a state of revolution. It must, however, be said that the experience of the development of the world revolution until recently has given no indications of the realization of this theory. It is the opinion of the Communist International that it is not its concern to indicate the exact form in which revolution is to develop.”<sup>4</sup>

Is the Soviet the “historically developed form” of the Socialist state or is such a state likely to function with equal efficiency in a modified form of parliamentary régime?

Parliament as it exists today is entirely unsuitable as an instrument for the transformation of the capitalist state into a Socialist Commonwealth. While the institution antedates the rule of the capitalist class, the latter has in the course of its long political reign so radically changed its functions and forms that the modern parliamentary régime serves primarily to defend

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<sup>4</sup> “The I. L. P. and the Third International,” London, 1920, p. 44.

and perpetuate the rule of the bourgeoisie. In capitalist society the economic life of the people, the management and operation of the industries, and the distribution of goods is left almost entirely to private initiative. The government is but little interested in that vital sphere—its functions are prevalently political. It regards the members of the community not in the light of producers and consumers of goods or performers and users of services, but in their common and abstract aspect of “citizens.” Accordingly representation in parliaments is based on political lines and geographical constituencies.

The modern capitalist state furthermore has the twofold task of preserving the outward appearances of political equality and at the same time securing the domination of the ruling class, and each outstanding feature of its parliamentary régime is primarily designed to accomplish a part of the delicate performance.

The system of “checks and balances,” which is the pride of parliamentary institutions, particularly in the countries of Anglo-Saxon civilization, is a cunningly devised scheme to check the will and power of the masses, i. e., the working class, and to throw the political balance in favor of the classes in power.

By the operation of that system the “Lower House” of parliament, elected by popular vote, is in practice often reduced to impotence. The “Upper House” is devised as a “conservative” and restraining control over

the elected representatives of the "sovereign" people. Its members are hereditary aristocrats as in England, or governmentally-appointed dignitaries as in Italy, or elected on the basis of indirect suffrage as in France, or by unequal constituencies as in the United States, and in most countries they are given co-ordinate legislative powers with the popular chamber.

If a "radical" measure happens to pass the double barrier of the two chambers by dint of special popular clamor, the executive power frequently has the right to veto it, and the measure so vetoed cannot be repassed except upon an increased majority vote, which virtually puts the legislative power in the hands of the conservative minority. In the United States even such measures as have passed both houses with executive sanction or over an executive veto, do not always acquire legal effect. They may be set aside by the courts as invalid or unconstitutional. Laws of vital national importance have thus been nullified by five out of nine judges of the United States Supreme Court.

But even more paralyzing than the Upper House, the executive veto, and the judicial power of nullification, is the parliamentary separation of legislative and executive functions. In the United States the division of governmental functions into executive, legislative, and judicial, is open and complete. The President is the Chief Executive and the heads of the departments of the government are appointed by him as his personal advisers. The Senate, or Upper House, is given the

right of confirming or rejecting such appointments, but the House of Representatives, the Lower House, is neither consulted about the choice of cabinet ministers nor does it control their policies and official actions. In most other countries of parliamentary régime the members of the cabinet are in theory selected by and responsible to the Lower House. In actual operation, however, the executive departments are practically independent of parliament. The Prime Minister, although appointed by the Chief Executive, is as a rule the choice of parliament, but the remaining members of his cabinet are selected by him. Parliament has no opportunity to consider them on their individual merits. It must accept all or none.

To exercise effective control over the ramified organs of practical public administration, the members of Parliament have neither time nor opportunity, and still less the requisite training. The average M. P. elected on a political-party platform by a mixed geographical constituency, comes into the house utterly unprepared to deal with the detailed and complex problems of practical administration.

And yet it is the executive department that exercises the most important functions of government. It is supreme in the sphere of international affairs, it shapes the country's diplomatic relations and practically determines its policies of war or peace. It is the physical instrument and visible expression of the government and, above all, it directs and controls the all-important

“apparatus of the state,” the bureaucracy, the army, the police, etc.

It is therefore quite obvious that the revolutionary working class, in the words of Marx, “cannot simply lay hold of the ready made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes.”<sup>5</sup>

The functions of a Socialist state are preponderatingly economic. Its main object is to socialize the industries and to supervise and direct their operation when socialized. Its principal governing organ must be adapted to that purpose. It must include to a large extent trained men of practical industrial experience. It must deal with the people primarily as a community of producers and consumers in their variegated needs and interrelations, and not as a uniform aggregation of citizens.

But even in a Socialist state the economic functions are not exclusive, for there always remains a large and important sphere of governmental activities, such as foreign relations, public health, education, justice, etc., which may properly be considered as political in character. A Socialist state must, therefore, develop suitable administrative organs to take care equally of the economic and political interests of the people. Representation must be occupational as well as geographic.

The necessity of such cardinal changes in the con-

<sup>5</sup> “Civil War in France,” page 39.



stitution of parliament for the purposes of working class government has always been recognized by the Socialist authorities of all schools. Even such conservative writers as Sidney and Beatrice Webb advocate the establishment of a dual governing body in the British Socialist state—the Social Parliament and the Political Parliament, the former concerned with all matters economic and cultural, and the latter confined to tasks of a purely political nature.<sup>6</sup> The principal contribution of the English school of "*Guild Socialists*" is its minute analysis of the general political interests of the modern community as "neighbors," and its special economic interests as "producers" and "renderers of service," or "consumers" and "enjoyers," and its efforts to evolve a scheme of appropriate governmental organs to correspond to these different interests. Underneath the "Guild" and the "State," the "National Industrial Guild" and "Parliament," and similar formulæ of the new school<sup>7</sup> lies the same fundamental conception of the dual function of communal life, economic and political, and the effort to evolve a system of representation according to their respective importance in the Socialist state.

Whether the economic and political representatives

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<sup>6</sup> "A Constitution for the Socialist Commonwealth of Great Britain." By Sidney and Beatrice Webb, London, 1920.

<sup>7</sup> For a full exposition of the theories of Guild Socialism the reader is referred to "Self-Government in Industry," London, 1920; "Social Theory," N. Y., 1920, and "Guild Socialism," N. Y., 1920, all by G. D. H. Cole.

are to be comprised within one body or whether they are to constitute two or more separate "chambers"; whether they are to be bodies of equal and co-ordinate powers, with or without an appropriate common organ for reconciliation of possible conflicts, or whether the "Political" Parliament is to be subordinate to the "Economic" or "Social" Parliament, are open questions, but there is complete agreement among all Socialist authorities that the preponderatingly political character of modern parliament cannot be carried over into a Socialist state.

Furthermore, a Socialist régime, representing a proletarian majority of the people, will have a clear interest in placing the vital executive functions of the government in the control of the people through their direct representatives; to abrogate all parliamentary methods and customs which serve to thwart such control, including the separation of executive and legislative functions, and to break up the capitalist "apparatus of state."

This was one of the principal lessons which Marx drew half a century ago from the experience of the Paris Commune.

Characterizing the latter as "the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economic emancipation of labor," the founder of the modern Socialist philosophy describes its operation in the following language:

✓ 1  
"The Commune was formed of the municipal councillors, chosen by universal suffrage in various wards of the city, who were responsible to their constituents and subject to recall at all times. The majority of its members were naturally workingmen, or acknowledged representatives of the working class. The Commune was to be a working, not a parliamentary body, executive and legislative at the same time. Instead of continuing as the agent of the Central Government, the police was at once stripped of its political attributes, and turned into the responsible and at all times recallable agent of the Commune. So were the officials of the other branches of the Administration."<sup>8</sup>

Thus if a Socialist régime is to retain the institution of parliament at all, it would modify its forms and methods in at least these salient features: It would introduce occupational representation, abolish the "Upper House" and the veto power, place the practical work of administration in direct control of parliament and make its members actively participate in such work. It would turn all state organs into responsible agencies of the working class government, and provide for a system of recalling representatives at all times.

The Soviet as such is also a form of representative government based upon a system of popular election. The Russian system excludes from the suffrage em-

<sup>8</sup> "The Civil War in France," English translation by E. Belfort Bax, page 43, revised from the German original.

ployers of labor and other recipients of workless income as well as persons engaged in certain specific non-productive and non-favored occupations. With the exception of these excluded categories all Russian citizens, men and women above eighteen years of age, are entitled to vote. 2

The supreme organ of government is the All-Russian Congress of Soviets, in which the urban inhabitants are represented on the basis of one delegate for every 25,000 voters, while the rural population has one seat for every 125,000 inhabitants. Representation is in no case direct, but it is more direct for the urban workers than for the rural population. The former choose deputies to the town or city congress, which in turn elects direct representatives to the All-Russian Congress of Soviets, while the inhabitants of the village are separated from such elections by three successive bodies of widening circles: the village, rural (volost) and provincial Soviets.

The All-Russian Congress of Soviets meets semi-annually. It elects a Central Executive Committee of 200, which is "the supreme power of the Republic" between meetings of the All-Russian Congress. The Central Executive Committee is theoretically in continuous session, and its members are actively employed in the different departments of the government. The Committee elects the Council of Peoples' Commissars, a body corresponding to the Cabinet in other countries. All elections are subject to the right of recall.

Such is the general structure of the Soviet government. In what features does it differ from parliament reorganized in accordance with the Socialist conception?

The distinction most frequently sought to be drawn is that the suffrage under the Soviet régime is limited to producers.

"What is the main difference between a Parliamentary Republic and a Republic of Soviets?" asks Bukharin, and he answers his own query promptly and categorically: "The difference is that *the classes which do not work have no vote* in the Soviet Republic and take no part in its government." At another place he observes: "The Constituent Assembly differs from the Congress of Soviets because in the Constituent Assembly sit not only the workers and peasants, but also the bankers, landholders and capitalists."<sup>9</sup>

This view seems to accord with the oft-reiterated Communist doctrine that the capitalist class must be "deprived of its political rights" throughout the period of proletarian dictatorship. And still it seems very doubtful that the limitation of the suffrage can be considered the cardinal distinguishing feature of the Soviet.

Socialists authorities have never favored disfranchising any class of the population even in the period

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<sup>9</sup> "Program of the Communists," pages 21 and 22.

of proletarian dictatorship, except as an extraordinary and temporary measure during acute struggles with counter-revolutionary forces. Karl Marx recorded with approval that "nothing could be more foreign to the spirit of the Commune than to replace universal suffrage by hierarchic institutions,"<sup>10</sup> and the Bolshevik theoreticians are by no means agreed in advocating the disfranchisement of the bourgeoisie in all cases and for all times. Nicholas Lenin, for instance, rejects the theory in no uncertain manner. In his polemic with Karl Kautsky, he observes :

"The restriction of the franchise is a specific national question, and not one relating to dictatorship in general. One must study the question of the restriction of the franchise in the light of the specific conditions of the Russian revolution and the specific course of its development. \* \* \* But it would be rash to guarantee in advance that the impending proletarian revolutions in Europe will, all or for the most part, be accompanied by a restriction of the franchise in the case of the bourgeoisie. This may be so. In fact, after the war and after the experience of the Russian revolution it will probably be so. But it is not absolutely necessary for the establishment of a dictatorship. It does not enter as a necessary condition in the historical or class conception of dictatorship."

And again :

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<sup>10</sup> "Civil War in France," p. 46.

"As I have pointed out already, the disfranchisement of the bourgeoisie does not constitute a necessary element of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Nor did the Bolsheviks in Russia, when putting forward the demand for such a dictatorship, long before the November revolution, say anything in advance about the disfranchisement of the exploiters. This particular element of the dictatorship was not born according to a plan conceived by some party, but grew up spontaneously in the course of the fight." <sup>11</sup>

The Soviet form of government does not necessarily mean an exclusively working-class constituency, nor does it imply a system of occupational representation, as is often asserted.

Under a system of occupational representation the industries of the country are represented in the national governing body by delegates chosen by and for such industries. Under such a system the railroad workers, miners, metal workers, tailors, shoemakers, etc., would each have their own qualified representatives to look out for the interests of the particular industry as part of the general scheme of national industrial administration. The Russian electoral system embodies no such principle. It is based wholly on geographical units, the town, the village, volost, and province. True, in the towns the vote is cast in factories and trade unions, but that is done merely for

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<sup>11</sup> "The Proletarian Revolution," pages 39 and 58.

practical reasons of convenience. The voter in the factory or trade union is not limited in his choice of delegate to a member of his own craft, and when the delegates chosen in the "primaries" assemble for the election of a representative to the All-Russian Congress of Soviets, they represent a body taken from numerous vocations who choose the "best man" on the basis of general political considerations. Neither the All-Russian Congress of Soviets, nor the Central Executive Committee, nor the Council of Peoples' Commissars are made up in whole or in part of representatives of special industries or occupations as such.

The other features of the Soviet structure most frequently dwelt upon, the combination of legislative and executive functions, the responsibility of representatives and officials, their election for short terms, and the right to recall them at any time, are, as we have seen, features by no means incompatible with parliamentary institutions. In fact, short periods of office, and control of elected representatives through the instruments of the referendum and the recall are political measures which have originated in the camp of liberal middle-class reformers and are in full bloom in many parts of the United States as well as in Switzerland and elsewhere.

The determining feature of the Soviet is its indirect and elaborate system of voting, which operates to give to the industrial working class minority political preponderance over the peasant majority. ✓



This result is achieved in several ways. First, the peasantry is frankly given a smaller representation in proportion to its numbers than the town workers. The urban residents are given one delegate for every 25,000 voters, while the rural population is represented by one deputy for every 125,000 inhabitants. This assumes a ratio of 1 voter to 5 inhabitants, i. e., a total vote equal to 20% of the population. Considering that both sexes enjoy the franchise, that the right to vote begins at the age of eighteen years, that the disfranchised bourgeoisie is numerically insignificant and that all residents are citizens entitled to vote, it seems safe to conjecture that no less than 40% of the Russian people have the right to vote in villages as well as in towns. On this basis 125,000 inhabitants contain at least 50,000 voters and the peasant representation is thus cut down one-half in comparison with that of the urban population. In all likelihood, however, the voting portion of the population is much higher than 40%.

✓ The town worker is further favored by dual representation in the All-Russian Congress of Soviets, for the town Soviet elects delegates to that body directly and also sends representatives to the provincial Soviet, who participate in the latter's elections to the All-Russian Congress of Soviets.

But perhaps the most important practical result in the direction of suppressing peasant representation is achieved by the process of successive sifting and elimination inherent in the Soviet system of elections.

Otto Bauer has pointed out this process and analyzed its working with great clearness.

"The mass of Russian peasants is still practically unorganized," he argues, "they are unschooled and uninterested. If the state does not molest them in their villages, they do not care by whom and how the state is governed. Only small minorities of the rural population show a livelier interest in general political problems and greater political activity. The system of indirect representation upon which the Soviet constitution rests, has the purpose and effect of permitting only the politically active minority to express itself. The election of the village Soviet, which administers the village affairs, may still interest the whole peasantry. The choice of delegates of the village Soviets to the rural Soviets already interests the dull mass of peasantry in a considerably lesser degree. But the industrial workers who have come back to the village, and the peasants who during the war had been in the town as soldiers and had there been drawn into the revolutionary labor movement, understand that the rural Soviets are the cells which form the body of the Soviet state. They evince a keener interest in the elections than the mass of peasantry, and since they are more active and better talkers than the others, they carry the elections without difficulty. Thus the rural congress already presents a different spirit than the village soviet; the active, revolutionary, proletarian minority is more prominently in evidence than in the village

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soviet. This process is carried further in the elections from the rural soviets to the provincial congress. The average peasant is not interested in the provincial congress; what does he in the village care for the distant provincial capital? It is the ~~active revolutionary~~ minorities who ~~send the delegates to the provincial~~ congress. There they meet with the representatives of the town soviets, accept their spiritual leadership and furnish them the votes for the elections of delegates from the provincial soviet to the All-Russian Congress of Soviets. That is why the provincial soviet as a rule does not send to the All-Russian Congress of Soviets representatives of the dull, illiterate and conservative peasant mass, but members of the urban proletariat and of the village minorities led by them. There they are joined by the direct representatives of the town soviets. Thus the rule of the urban proletariat in the Congress is assured."

The indirect system of Soviet elections plays the same rôle in the sphere of practical politics as the Communist Party in the field of propaganda and moral pressure—it preserves the hegemony of the industrial worker over the peasant.

That the system works in the direction indicated is proved by the overwhelming preponderance of the industrial workers and their intellectual spokesmen in all determining organs of the Soviet Government, the Council of Commissars, the Central Executive Committee and the All-Russian Congress of Soviets.

It is obvious that the Soviet constitution was thus formulated in response to the special exigencies of the Russian revolution. Is there any reason to assume that it will be uniformly adopted by the victorious proletariat in other countries? 2

Similar conditions will, most likely, produce similar results. A Socialist revolution in the Balkan countries, for instance, or in Poland or in the Russian border states, is quite apt to adopt a government largely modeled upon the Russian Soviet plan. In countries of western civilization, in which the proletariat has grown to larger numerical strength and the whole population, including the rural, has attained a higher degree of political maturity, the form of government of the Socialist state will be determined by the circumstances under which the revolution will occur, the extent to which it will be influenced by the Russian example and the strength of parliamentary traditions in the country. According to whether the one or the other of the last mentioned elements will prevail the new Socialist government may take its starting point in the parliamentary or Soviet system. But the difference will be largely one of name and not of substance. A Socialist government in a country of Western civilization can no more adopt the essentially Russian features of the Soviet than it can continue the essentially bourgeois features of parliament: