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The Future and the Workers: Slave State or Anarcho-Syndicalism?

Albert Meltzer

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The economic crises following the last war brought a series of revolutions, none of them successful, and in the long run, ruined the revolutionary movement. Not only was revolution unsuccessful but the revolutionary movement that had been built up under pre-war conditions became, eventually, the shock-troops of the enemy.

With the civilised world in ruins, the masses, understandably, began to feel the need for Security. Gradually, it became clear that there were two forms of security that they could turn to. One, conservatism: the preservation of as much of the established order as possible. Alternatively, dictatorship, the security of the slave state.

The hectic post-war years showed quite clearly again that increasing numbers of people were deliberately turning against independent thinking, and turning to either the policy of “enjoy yourself while you can” (essentially complementary to conservatism) or that of “follow the leader” (essentially the policy of dictatorship).

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We are faced to-day with the two systems, therefore of conservatism and dictatorship, and (owing to recent alignments) may be asked to choose between them to the extent of fighting for either the one or the other.

Let us make quite clear what the difference is.

It is patently wrong to draw a line of demarcation between Russian dictatorship and any other dictatorship. While there have been, and still are, certain differences between them, the underlying principle is the same exactly, and the trend inescapable. The differences are actually no more than the differences between (for instance) two undeniably Fascist countries, such as Germany and Italy, or (more obviously) between countries like Poland, French-Canada, Japan, China, South America, South Africa, India, Franco's Spain, etc., where Fascism does not exist in name but the same basic principles underly each.

To draw a line of distinction between the dictatorships and the democracies on the grounds of the political tie-ups is absurd — it implies putting Poland and Russia as democracies and some future British Government as a dictatorship.

Nevertheless, the democracies are in some ways different from the dictatorships. In the first place, nowadays they revolve, insofar as power-politics go, around Britain France and America (the Western democracies). Quite obviously, to ram Stakhanovism down the throats of citizens of the British Isles, or the race theory down the throats of Americans, or a handful of rice a day down the throats of Frenchmen, is asking for trouble. The technique of the new slave state is suited to each country: only those seeking the impossible can maintain that there is any other dividing line between one set of dictatorships or another, or the democracies.

It seems to be the case that the dividing line that does still exist will stay but this is by no means so. Rationalisation and super-industrialised Fordism in America, the clever GRADUAL Acts of Parliament in Britain, anti-Germanism in France — all bring in the slave state by instalments.

Sooner or later the slave state will be perfected in all the countries of the world — perhaps the small Labour-Government countries (Scandinavia, New Zealand, etc.) will hold out, we are told. It is doubtful, however, if any politician could resist the temptation. Undoubtedly the slave state has its advantages: security being the chief one, security of the people to get along somehow (unemployment, the product of liberal-capitalism, being eliminated by the lowering of the conditions of the employed), and security of the politicians to keep the people enslaved.

The new technique, moreover, for which we have the Bolshevik pioneers to curse, provides that the old slave-state troubles (this is, chattel slavery and wage slavery) can be cured: chattel slavery meant, sooner or later, revolt; wage slavery, thought: state-slavery simply crushes and persuades the masses that it's not so bad being crushed.

Let us face the fact that capitalism is going. The liberalism of the Nineteenth Century is washed out. The bosses are not content with capitalism at all. The slave state is, for them, the only way out. The quarrel is, at present: who shall be the bosses of the slave state?

Shall it be the old Capitalists or new politicians? And if it shall be the politicians, which set of politicians shall it be? (In this conflict, of course, lies the hope of revolut[ion]aries; that the quarrelling may be too severe for it to be either).

The question is, to a certain extent, being solved. In the democracies, the old capitalists will probably take control. The democracies are controlled on the economic side, and therefore allow freedom on the political side, which is of no importance. The banks are, definitely, more powerful than Parliament, for instance.

In the dictatorships, the politicians will take control. The dictatorships are controlled politically, and therefore allow far more economic freedom. (Thus they have acted against unemployment in a manner the democracies could not).

When the full flavour of the Munich Agreement becomes apparent, it will be seen that there will be no chance (or very little) of an inter-governmental war. The pockets of the bourgeoisie being their gods, Disraeli — Kipling — Churchill — Attlee Imperialism will go for ever. There will be no more swashbuckling over minor matters of prestige. Instead, the United States of the World will be a practical proposition. The Labourists will be delighted at the coming into being of an international police force, the revival of the League of Nations, the beginnings of international government. It is one of the most horrible prospects the masses have ever been faced with. The governments of the world will be combined to suppress revolution, and, even more, to keep down the economic level of the masses as far as they can.

True, the money saved on excessive armaments will probably be spent on social service of some description (maybe super-roads, which will come in useful to carry troops, like Haussmanised Paris). There seems no reason why NECESSARY social service should not be introduced, EXCEPT that with the international co-operation of governments the NEED for bothering about the well-being of the masses will have disappeared. It may be that the end of capitalism (a product of nineteenth century liberalism, not of twentieth century super-production) will see the beginning of the worst period of the world's history.

If and when the old capitalists are eliminated control will pass entirely to the politicians. The world will be in the hands of the States. With this situation we, the workers of the world, have to deal. What are we going to do to prevent the coming of the system after capitalism? (Marx, be it noted, prophesied this system successfully: he predicted it would be socialism — he could not have foreseen what would have happened to socialism in the meantime: the most potent argument against Marxism).

Firstly, we must make a clean break with politics and politicians. There is no point in continuing with those who are going to be the oppressors.

Secondly, we must organise QUICKLY for the overthrow of capitalism and the State BEFORE IT IS TOO LATE. Bearing in mind that the end of capitalism means the end, in all probability, of the class-struggle as previously interpreted, we must right now determine on a future programme which will be EQUALLY anti-capitalist and anti-State, based on the working-class itself.

A revolution that takes for the masses the entire economic life, and entirely destroys the political side (that is, the State) is the only guarantee for the masses that they will not be exploited. All their guarantee is in themselves, through their own economic commitments.

Therefore, the revolution cannot have anything to do with political parties: it must be a complete revolution, and there must be no allowance for counter-revolutionary and political elements.

The working-class must take for itself the entire machinery of production, unless it wants the State to take that machinery and relegate the masses into complete misery and subservience.