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The Order of the Hour

Rudolf Rocker

28 November 1941

That the present war, which spreads itself over all continents and is engulfing mankind like a bloody flood, cannot be measured by the standards of military conflicts of the past, is beginning to be realised even by those who believe that historical facts can be denied through aged theories.

The habit of considering every historical event as the outcome of fixed economic laws which ultimately lead to a higher stage of social life, is a terribly blind belief and has contributed in no small measure to the development of the present situation. Even though one is the bitterest opponent of the present economic system, to assert that the present war is being waged solely in the interests of capitalist groups is such a twisting of the truth that worse could not be invented. Even if it is accepted that certain capitalist circles are profiting from the great slaughter of the people, it nevertheless cannot be denied that the present catastrophe is transforming itself into a bloody menace to capitalism itself, and is against the interests of its servants and representatives. A social earthquake on such a vast scale must become a threat to every social system; that is why this fearful catastrophe is not simply a problem of certain classes, but of the whole of society itself.

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It is a poor consolation to assert that the workers could have prevented the war if they had been more alert to their "class interests". That they had the power to do so, no one wishes to deny: but that they nevertheless did not prevent it, and that the great tragedy of our time has come just the same, is also a fact. To-day we know already that the broad masses of the French Labour Movement have aided in weakening the opposition to Hitler's hordes. Had the German workers done the same, it might have been a gain; but they did not do so, and the internal collapse of France therefore led to the bloody yoke of the German occupation upon the French Labour Movement.

The same story repeats itself in every European country. Just because the workers have too closely understood their so-called "class interests" and have underestimated the menace which threatens everybody, they, together with the whole of society, became the victims of the bloodiest tyranny in history.

The present war is not only an economic issue. It is first of all a power problem between two different forces of social evolution. One of these leads back to the epoch of absolutism, to the common enslavement of mankind, whereas the second slowly raises the people to a higher social and cultural level, and carries with it the historical legacy left to us by the revolutions of the past.

The abolition of feudal absolutism and of the economic reign of feudalism through the democratic and liberal revolutions, was necessary in order to provide the pre-conditions for the development of the modern Labour Movement and Socialism. Without the political rights and liberties which have been achieved the social movements of our epoch could not even have been thought of. Through them social aims have been developed. The rights which we now enjoy to-day in the democratic countries have not been received by the nations as gifts from their governments; they are the results of hard and bloody struggles and were often paid for with great sacrifices. Whoever fails to take into account these rights

and is in agreement with Lenin's phrase that "freedom is but a middle-class prejudice" is altogether lost for a movement which strives towards social liberation.

One doesn't serve social liberation by squandering, without a struggle, rights already gained, but only when one is always ready to broaden these rights and create for them a wider field of effectiveness. It is not less rights and smaller liberties that we demand, but more rights and greater liberties. Whoever thinks differently is ripe for dictatorship and for the totalitarian state, and is consciously or unconsciously assisting the development of social reaction.

If it is true that democracy and liberalism have prepared the way for the modern Labour Movement and the social aims of our time, then it cannot be denied that the abolition of all democratic and liberal achievements must automatically lead to the abolition of the Labour Movement and of all libertarian aims. That this is not a vain assertion can be seen from the present bloody reality. The totalitarian regime has made a hell for liberty; and if this was not understood at the beginning, it was a great error which is now being paid for in blood.

The terrible tyranny in all countries which have been poisoned by the totalitarian cliques in the occupied countries; the cowardly and conscienceless murdering of so-called living hostages; the daily executions of anti-fascist workers and peasants in Norway, Holland, Belgium, France, Czecho-Slovakia, Roumania, Serbia, Hungary, &c., create the existence of the totalitarian state. The ancient laws against the Jews; the frightful condition of millions of people in Europe who have been placed outside the law; the fear of the concentration camp; the barbaric suppression of all cultural achievements will bring about the collapse of civilisation in general, if Hitler should unfortunately be victorious.

To assert that to us it is all the same who is victor in this terrible conflict, means to aid the cowardly murderers, and to prepare the world for the "blessing" of Hitler's "New Order".

The struggle against totalitarian slavery and its bestial achievements is the first duty of our time, the first condition for a new social development in the spirit of freedom and social justice. But the fact that we are making the struggle against dictatorship and the human-debauchery of the totalitarian state the order of the present hour does not mean that we believe even for a moment that the citizenship-society is the best in the world. It only means that we recognize the possibility of a higher development under better and more human conditions.

When the world is liberated from the militarisation of social life, from all forms of the totalitarian ant-state – only then will new possibilities be opened up for constructive creating and building. Freedom does not recognise a pre-determined ultimate aim; it is but the means which can open for us the doors to a new future. Since the creative forces of society were not able to build up a dam against the bloody flood of the war, let them at least learn from the newest terrible history in what manner it can, once and for all time, prevent similar catastrophes.

Not the slave-state of a so-called “Aryan” race will be the aim of humanity, but a federation of free nations, such as has been foreseen by Saint-Simon, Proudhon and Bakunin. That is the only basis on which a new life can be developed, and which will make our existence worthy and with a purpose.