

# THOUGHTS on MAY and OCTOBER

**W**HILE May Day gives inspiration to us as workers in various parts of the Labour movement, it should also give to us as educationists pause for thought as to improved ways of filling old and new needs in our educational work. How far have we in the past succeeded in adapting our work to the real needs of the movement? Are there any new functions which a rapidly changing historical process requires of us?

It is a commonplace to say that history has changed many things since the beginning of the I.W.C.E. movement, and has given us in the meanwhile many epoch-making events to think about. We are now at the stage when the workers' struggle is reaching its culminating and acutest phase. We have witnessed in the history of Europe in the last ten years, events connected with this phase that are considerably richer in lessons than the example of the Paris Commune. Moreover, we have now a veritable literature in English on the subject of these events. Is it not urgent, therefore, for us to make a study of this rich experience an important part of our educational work? Does not the changed situation require that, in addition to description and analysis of the *objective factors* (the economic factors which are "making conditions ripe," "giving birth to certain social tendencies," etc.), we should analyse the

*subjective* factors of current history as well—the aims, methods, strategy and tactics of the mass struggle? And I say “analyse” advisedly and not merely “recount” or “describe”; for facts are of little interest unless they “speak”; and it is the aim of science in general and Marxian sociology in particular to handle facts so that they are made to “speak.” In other words, is there not a need to study not merely economics, but also politics, by which is meant, not electioneering devices and Parliamentary procedure, but the whole organisation and strategy of the workers’ struggle?

We are not lacking, as I have said, in the literature on which to begin. Three years ago, Trotsky, in a very brilliant preface\* pleaded for greater attention to the lessons of the Russian Revolution of October†, 1917, and attempted himself to adduce some lessons from it, which were touched on in an article in *The PLEBS* of May, 1925. Comrade Louzon, in July, raised some further questions in connection with this discussion. The course of events in Germany and Italy, and the reasons for the defeat of the workers’ movement in those countries have received attention in two very admirable studies.‡ We have the experience of our own Labour Government, of Black Friday and Red Friday, and an excellent detailed account of the problems besetting Labour Parliamentary Government in Australia.§ The stories of Austria and of Hungary, of the subsequent events in Germany in March, 1921, and in the autumn of 1923, and of Bulgaria in 1923, have not yet been told save for a few scattered articles in periodicals.|| Nevertheless, we have sufficient here for several lecture courses, and a most fertile field for the researcher.

Finally, we have recently had two publications of first-rate importance. One the famous book by John Reed, superb as a piece of literature, of first significance as an historical account of those October days; the other a collection of letters and articles which Lenin wrote between August and October, 1917. The letters end with the famous “Letter to the Comrades” on the eve of the crucial days, when he replies point by point to those in his own party (Kamenev, Riasanov, Zinoviev, etc.), who pleaded that the time was not ripe for the seizure of power.

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\* Since published in English as *The Lessons of October, 1917*, by L. Trotsky (Lab. Pub. Co., 3s.). See also comments on it in *The Errors of Trotskyism*, (C.P.G.B., 2s.).

† The Russian Revolution took place on October 25th according to the old Russian calendar, which was November 7th by the ordinary Western calendar.

‡ M. P. Price, *Germany in Transition* (Lab. Pub. Co.) and L. W., *Fascism* (PLEBS, 6d.).

§ V. Gordon Childe, *How Labour Governs in Australia* (Lab. Pub. Co.).

|| See PLEBS, November, 1924; *Labour Monthly*, April, 1924 (World of Labour), and July, 1924; *Communist International*, Nos. 2, 3, 16.

John Reed's book puts these letters against the background of events ; and the story as it develops forces on one the irresistible feeling that October was essentially the "psychological moment" and that Lenin in seizing on this fact (though he was in exile in Finland), was right. It was the point at which the tide had reached its high mark, and was beginning to ebb. A month earlier the masses had not sufficiently abandoned faith in the old Menshevik leaders, who were represented in the Government and on the Executive of the Soviets (elected some months before). A month later Kerensky might have replaced the "Red" Petrograd garrison by "White" Cossacks ; he might have yielded to the insistent advice of the officers and bankers to take repressive measures against the Bolsheviks ; the Constituent Assembly (Parliament) with its overwhelming peasant influence, would have met and probably induced the Soviets to retreat to an insignificant back seat. Two months earlier as a compromise to ensure a "peaceful progression of the revolution," Lenin had advocated support of a Menshevik Government, provided it were made entirely and exclusively responsible to the Soviets (like a Macdonald Cabinet reporting to and getting its instructions from a national Council of Action). By October, the situation had so changed as to make that no longer a possibility ; and he accordingly advocated the immediate planning of a seizure of power. This could be organised by the Bolsheviks through the machinery of the Petrograd Soviet, where they now had a majority, and should be timed for the day *before* the meeting of the All-Russian Soviet Congress, so that the Congress would meet a *fait accompli* and face the necessity of organising a Soviet Government.

The various attitudes of opposition to this demand are particularly interesting ; for they show clearly tendencies which one can already see at an earlier stage of development in the movement in this country. There were those inside the Bolshevik Party who thought the time was not ripe, and argued that the enemy were too strong, that bread supplies were insufficient, that other countries would not follow suit, that Blanquism was not Marxism, etc. There were the intellectuals gathered round Gorki's paper, who were opposed to Kerensky, but thought it better to wait for the meeting of the Constituent Assembly, when the "Left" could adopt the role of a powerful "ginger group" to keep the Kerensky Government "up to scratch." There were the Left Social Revolutionaries, the extreme peasant party, who sided with the Bolsheviks against their opponents, and at times entered into coalition with them, but were not prepared to take the initiative, preferring to "wait and see." After the actual seizure of power had taken place, these three groups of opinion combined in advocating the formation of a coalition in government of *all* the Socialist Parties and the disbanding of Trotsky's

Military Revolutionary Committee with its military measures, and in opposing the suppression of the bourgeois Press.

But whereas Lenin would brook no compromise in the seizure of power, it was precisely his shrewd realism in knowing the right time to make concessions *after* the power had been won that settled the seemingly insoluble problem of the peasantry.\*

What kind of lessons, then, can we learn from a study of October and of like situations in other countries?

Trotsky, in the preface already mentioned, tried to draw two chief lessons. First, he declared that it taught the importance of the "psychological moment"—the time (it might be a few weeks or even a few days), when the complex of conditions was most favourable to a seizure of power. At such times, it is clear, history has the character of a chemical compound rather than of an aggregation of mechanical forces: an additional element will change completely the whole compound; the addition of one small cause will produce an effect of very great magnitude. To hesitate at such a moment to supply this additional factor is to lose the golden moment; since at such times the objective situation (mass emotions, the strategy of the ruling class, etc.), is continually changing, and once it has changed, the favourable combination of events may not occur again—at least for a considerable time. His second conclusion was that it was the organised, disciplined class Party of the workers that was necessary to supply this additional *active* factor, a Party capable of leading the masses, and organising and carrying through the strategy of this culminating phase of the class struggle. The absence of such a party in Germany and Austria in 1918; its immaturity in Italy in 1920-1, and Germany in March, 1921; its union with the Social-Democrats in Hungary in 1919 (coalition of Socialist *leaders* instead of a union with the peasant *masses*), and hence the paralysis of the workers' dictatorship in taking the requisite measures to consolidate power; its failure to seize the "psychological moment" in Germany and Bulgaria in 1923—these were the reasons why history took a different course in Central Europe, and why we now see capitalist dictatorship and White Terror more strongly entrenched there than before.

The Russian critics of Trotsky at the time of the appearance of this Preface argued that, while it was important to study October, Trotsky gave too much stress to this: while emphasising the value of the Party during the insurrectionary period, he neglected its importance in the preparatory struggles and in the subsequent consolidation of power and building of a Socialist State. Comrade

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\* A parallel to this in our case would probably be the relation with the nationalist movements in India, Egypt, etc.

Louzon followed up this question in *The PLEBS* of July, 1925, by suggesting that, while Trotsky was right in stressing the insurrectionary value of a disciplined Party as a kind of Blanquist organisation during the October days, he had also been right in his pre-1917 days, when he had opposed Lenin in designing a less "sectarian" attitude and a looser body to embrace the Gorki group and the Left Mensheviks. This, and not a closely organised Party, was necessary for the preparatory period.

The multitude of important questions which hang on an issue of this kind can only be approached in a scientific spirit by a study of the post-war history of the class struggle in Europe. For instance, wherein did Lenin's October policy differ from Blanquism? Or is Louzon right in identifying them? As we have noticed, it was exactly this argument that Leninism was Blanquism which was used by those who opposed his October policy. To this, Lenin in his "Letter to the Comrades," gives a very characteristic and vigorous reply:—

"A military plot is pure Blanquism, *if* it is not organised by the Party of a determined class; *if* the organisers of it do not justly estimate the correct moment; *if* they have not on their side the sympathy (proved by deeds) of the majority of the people . . . *if* the slogans of insurrection have not acquired the widest diffusion and the greatest popularity; *if* the advanced workers are not convinced of the desperate situation of the masses and assured of the support of the country workers . . ." etc.

In other words, Blanquism is a sectarian Party *without the masses*. Lenin succeeded in October precisely because his Party had become a Party linked with and supported by the masses; because his action fitted into and consummated the objective situation.

Of course, if one identifies the October events with Blanquism, as Louzon does, it is not difficult to deduce from it that the party-organisation suited to that situation is unsuited to other situations. That conclusion would apply, certainly, to Trotsky's Military Revolutionary Committee, formed *from* the Party to meet the October situation. But it does not apply to the Party itself, the importance of which is the kernel of Leninism. If Leninism implies the Party *plus* the masses, and not either the one or the other alone, how pursue an October policy if the Party has not played its part as a leader of the masses in the preparatory period, building tradition of unity and experience within itself, and forging a living contact with the masses? If Lenin's Party had not been closely disciplined in the past, there would have been small chance of the inner unity essential to its task, small chance of the October policy carrying the day against the hesitating "wait and see" elements. A Blanquist conspiracy might be engineered overnight; but not a Party in the Leninist sense, capable of taking power at the "psychological

moment" and *constructing* Socialism. This, the experience of Germany and Austria and Italy shows.

Lenin declared that to underestimate the importance of such a Party was to overestimate the *spontaneity* in the masses (as in his controversy with Rosa Luxemburg): it was to underestimate the role of the "conscious" factor in history, to underestimate the importance of seizing the "psychological moment," and in practice to join the ranks of the party of "wait and see." It comes close to what Lenin wittily characterised as *Khvostism* (dragging along at the *tail*): the policy of dragging *behind* the masses, instead of going ahead and leading them, always excusing one's own slowness and inactivity by the slowness and immaturity of the masses.

One sees, too, from a study of October and similar events how the democratic institutions at times of crisis in the class struggle fall into the background—and this fact one sees in our own Red Friday. Elected on a geographical basis some time before, perhaps on unreal issues, they do not reflect the real issues of the crisis, nor the existing balance of forces; and being closely linked with the bourgeois State apparatus, either become passive spectators, or else (like the Petrograd City Duma) centres of reaction. To think of the class struggle, therefore, in purely Parliamentary terms and make one's instrument and rallying-point an electoral propagandist machine, is really to side-track the struggle—to take the Liverpool rather than the Scarborough road. One sees, too, the folly of making the struggle wait upon democratic forms and formal Parliamentary procedure. This involves *Khvostism*, from the necessity of watering down one's slogans in the search for votes to meet the temper of the backward sections of the workers, or even of the petty bourgeoisie. It means to let the "psychological moment" pass ("waiting for the Constituent Assembly," etc.), or even to fail to notice that the moment has arrived; it rests on the assumption that the objective situation and the tactics of "the other side" remain static. For instance, at the moment, the immediate fight for internal trade-union unity in defence of the miners and resistance to the "splitting" policy of the Parliamentary Right, for Anglo-Russian and anti-imperialist trade-union unity against Dawes and Locarno, etc., are far more important strategically and as rally-cries for the masses than the details of the Parliamentary game and elaborate legislative programs for the next election. One sees, too, from the experience of Russia and Germany and Austria and Italy alike, the prime importance of detaching the masses from their faith in the old Menshevik and Social-Democrat leaders who scheme merely to lead the workers into coalition with capitalism. A "left-wing" that does not follow Lenin's advice of criticising Kerensky *while*

attacking Kornilov will not have the masses with it when the "psychological moment" arrives.

Moreover, one sees most clearly of all, perhaps, the impossibility of constructing Socialism, of ending war and imperialism, and of introducing a scientifically planned economy, until *after* supreme power has passed to the workers. Hence the necessity, for the present, of all tactics and "partial demands" and slogans being strictly adapted to this end. One sees that capitalist power does not rest in a Parliamentary majority; but in control of big industry, the banks and transport, the civil service, army and navy, education and the Press. To win power means to have control (*real* not *nominal*) over these institutions through the medium of the workers' own organisations (T.U.s, factory and soldiers' committees, Councils of Action, etc.).

There has been some murmuring of late that our teaching is too academic. May not the truth behind the murmurs be that new times have put new questions to us, and that the time is ripe for an extension of our studies to solve questions such as those touched on here? May not the May Day message be for us:—"The experience of the last ten years, rich in lessons for us which we shall neglect at our peril, cries out for analysis. Some of the material is already available in English. When are we going to begin?"

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