

B U L L E T I N

A MIRROR FOR JOHNSON

by

Paul Temple

November, 1943

421

A MIRROR FOR JOHNSON

by
Paul Temple

The presentation of the NC resolution on the national question has aroused a number of comrades to protest and polemic. That is a good thing, among other reasons because it will help to educate the party while at the same time demonstrating the need for education.

The September Internal Bulletin, in which Comrades Larry O'Connor, Roy Gould, George Tobin and Harry Allen present their viewpoint in opposition to the NC resolution, accomplishes mainly the second.

Of the four, I prefer the contribution by Larry O'Connor. I prefer it because he makes most of the points by explicit political statement, rather than by indirection. Johnson's production on the national question so far, for example, has to be interpreted before criticism can even begin. (For that matter, Comrade Allen found that it had to be interpreted even before agreement could begin.)

Now my friend O'Connor is not opposed to the slogan of national liberation for occupied Europe. (Neither is Tobin; even Gould thinks it is possible -- perhaps... but for an unstated reason, only for Holland and Norway.) O'Connor makes it pretty clear that the slogan is something a revolutionist admits supporting only if pressed to the wall by a heckler. Obviously, you can't say you're against it . . .

O'Connor bases himself on a theory. The theory represents an error with an historical tradition:

"The struggle for national liberation is and always has been dominated by the bourgeoisie and the intelligentsia. ...

"A workers' struggle for 'national liberation,' particularly in the advanced countries of Europe tends, by its very nature, to be subordinated to the program of the liberal bourgeoisie and its intelligentsia...."
(Page 2)

(The sentences omitted in the above quotation present an "economic-determinist" explanation for the intelligentsia's support to national independence which is typical of vulgarized Marxism -- they make their living by teaching the national language, etc.)

The above quote from O'Connor is (1) factually incorrect; (2) in complete opposition to our theory of permanent revolution; (3) contradicted by O'Connor himself in the same article.

A THEORY AND ITS ROOTS

The struggle for national liberation has not "always" been dominated by the bourgeoisie. O'Connor may remember that Lenin's party came to dominate a couple of national struggles for national liberation, which struggles were thereupon merged with the struggle of the working class for a workers' and peasants' government

The struggle for national liberation has usually been dominated by the bourgeoisie. This statement is exactly as true as the statement that (1) all the actions and ideas of the masses of people have usually been dominated by the ruling class, except when these masses come under revolutionary leadership. And it is also as true as the statement that (2) the socialist movements, even when they had a chance to dominate national-liberation movements -- that is, in revolutionary periods -- have quite usually declined even to make the attempt. Case in point: the Austrian socialists (including the left wing) during the First World War.

On what ground did they decline? Largely on the basis of O'Connor's theory, which can be stated quite succinctly as follows:

"National liberation is not a revolutionary socialist slogan; it is a democratic bourgeois slogan. It is therefore the job of the bourgeois democrats to push it. Revolutionary socialists have other fish to fry."

WILL THE BOURGEOISIE INEVITABLY DOMINATE THE NATIONAL STRUGGLE?

This theory is half-brother to the theory of the Mensheviks in the controversy within the Russian socialist movement prior to 1917. The Menshevik theory ran:

"It is the bourgeois democratic revolution that is at the top of the agenda in Russia." (Both Lenin and Trotsky agreed.) "The coming Russian Revolution will necessarily be limited to a bourgeois-democratic revolution, even if carried through by a revolting proletariat and peasantry." (Lenin agreed.) "The struggle will therefore necessarily be DOMINATED by the bourgeoisie."

"No!" said Lenin and Trotsky.

"The bourgeois-democratic revolution is at the top of the agenda -- that is true. THEREFORE, our agitational slogans are necessarily democratic ones: republic, constituent assembly, 8-hour day, national independence, etc.

"Bourgeois-democratic revolutions have up to now ALWAYS been dominated by the bourgeoisie -- that is true. THEREFORE, our task is to win this struggle away from bourgeois domination.

"And because the modern bourgeoisie is vacillating, cowardly and inconsistent in any progressive struggle it may venture on, the struggle 'tends by its very nature' to push the masses in the direction of the revolutionary workers and against the bourgeoisie!"

This is the exact opposite of O'Connor's viewpoint.

Is it not a hundred times truer in occupied Europe than it was in Russia? It is. Yet O'Connor blithely launches his article against the NC resolution with this theory that the national struggle 'tends by its very nature' to be subordinated to the program of the bourgeoisie. He adds:

"The moment it goes beyond specifically nationalist and bourgeois aims and slogans, it becomes something more than simply a struggle for national liberation."

Of course! of course! That is the whole importance of the national question in Europe today and of the NC resolution. The national struggle "tends by its very nature" to become MORE than simply a national struggle.

But its "nature" will remain latent if the revolutionary vanguard does not realize that in the national struggle may well lie the key to the European socialist revolution; if they frown upon it as being merely a complicating nuisance which in fact shouldn't have happened at all according to the Marxist prognosis for advanced imperialist countries; if the national-liberation struggle is so distasteful to them that (like O'Connor) they can't even write the words "national liberation" without a pair of depreciatory quotation marks about it!

FUEL VS. COLD WATER

But in accordance with this theory, O'Connor writes that "all our efforts must be directed, at the present time, not to throw fuel on the nationalist movement for 'national liberation,' but to throw cold water on all the illusions which are unavoidably created by such a movement." (P.5)

O'Connor has the cart and the horse in the proverbial position. Primarily the present nationalist illusions of the European workers have not been created by the national movement; they largely created it. And they will tend to be dissipated only by the development of the struggle for national liberation itself, not merely by demonstrations of the superiority of a Socialist United States of Europe. Thus it has always been and thus it will be.

That is why it is the position of the NC resolution precisely to "throw fuel" on the national movement. It is a good term that O'Connor introduces into the discussion. We wish energetically to stoke the fires of the national struggle and push it onward and forward to consistent and unwavering struggle -- because that is how revolutionists will get their opportunities for breaking the masses away from the domination of the inconsistent and wavering bourgeois "liberators", to take the leadership of the masses in action, to link up the struggle for national liberation with the struggle against capitalism at home, to reach the ear of the masses with socialist propaganda; and last but not least, on the basis of this, to create, organize and recruit to a revolutionary PARTY.

THE TENDENCY OF THE N.C. RESOLUTION'S OPPONENTS

Friend O'Connor's attitude toward the slogan of national liberation in occupied Europe is very neatly summarized by him (for himself and a number of others) in one sentence:

"As all are agreed that the Germans must go, there is no use agitating anyone, ourselves least of all, on this score." (P. 9)

We are not to agitate the European workers on the struggle against national oppression. Why? Because it is a popular slogan -- nay, it is so popular that we revolutionists can leave the question to the bourgeoisie (whose real property it is anyway) in order that we may devote all our energies to agitating for less popular causes....

O'Connor can try this one out and see how it works: "As all are agreed that the cost of living is too high, there is no use agitating anyone, ourselves

least of all, on this score."

The significant thing is: O'Connor is "in favor of" the slogan of national liberation but does not think revolutionists should build day-to-day agitation AROUND this question.

This is the statement of the position of the opponents of the NC resolution, whether they explicitly state it, like O'Connor, or write circles around it, like Johnson.

CONTRADICTIONS -- VERY UNDIALECTIC VARIETY

O'Connor is really sadly mixed up. He begins by laying down the theory that the struggle for national liberation (nay, the WORKERS' struggle for national liberation! -- in fact, "particularly in the ADVANCED countries of Europe"!) tends, "by its very nature," to be dominated by the bourgeoisie. First of all, he is a thousand times wrong.

In contrast, the thesis of the NC resolution is that the struggle for national liberation in occupied Europe today (precisely because of the advanced stage of capitalism; precisely because it is in its mass a WORKERS' struggle) tends to go over to overt political struggle --

- (1) against the German conquerors;
- (2) against their native bourgeois collaborators;
- (3) against the wavering, fearful and reactionary bourgeois "champions of liberation," and therefore
- (4) under the leadership of working-class revolutionists, as a transition to the direct struggle for socialist power.

This is the tendency which revolutionists seek to push to realization. Yet, after proposing his own theory, O'Connor actually turns about and puts his finger on the "fundamental weakness" of the NC resolution. What do you suppose it is? Its framers, he says, do not understand that the national struggle poses or will pose before the workers the problems of power!!

Yes, O'Connor is very much mixed up: he puts forward an exceedingly false theory, whose consistent conclusions are revisionist; then ascribes these conclusions to a resolution which presents precisely the opposite viewpoint, and calls this the "fundamental weakness" of the resolution!

THE OBVIOUS AND THE BLATANT

O'Connor does not at all understand this business of the democratic struggle as a transition to the direct struggle for socialism -- he actually does not understand it even after the experience of the Russian Revolution.

Speaking of raising democratic slogans as the "major ones" (I assume he means "major agitational slogans") he writes:

"Once fascism has been established that kind of a fight is simply irrelevant -- and every worker under fascism knows it! Such demands are not even transitional

ones as economic and political freedom is so obviously and blatantly incompatible with fascism that to demand it without demanding the total overthrow of totalitarianism is to act like a man who is being hanged who demands that the rope not be permitted to pinch the skin on his neck." (Page 7.)

The Bolsheviks raised many democratic demands under Tsarism -- popular elections to the Duma, confiscation of landowners' estates, for example. Obviously and blatantly incompatible with Tsarism -- to the Bolsheviks. The masses, however, with deplorable inconsistency, were willing to follow the Bolsheviks' leadership on this level, without however being immediately willing to follow through: few were willing to continue to the obvious step of armed insurrection against Tsarism; not many more to the blatant conclusion that socialism was the answer; and many were even stupid enough not to see that the perfectly evident alternative to Tsarism was at least a democratic republic.

What would O'Connor do with such stupid people, who were willing to fight for democratic demands only? The Bolsheviks devoted themselves to "throw fuel" on the democratic movement against Tsarism, knowing full well that the unfolding of the struggle itself was the bridge over which the masses would pass to revolutionary class-consciousness.

And they did this without any absurdities like: "As all are agreed that Tsarism must go, there is no use agitating anyone, ourselves least of all, on this score."

TRANSITIONS, BRIDGES AND BY-PASSES

What is a transitional demand? It is a demand --

- (1) with which large masses agree;
- (2) which they are willing to fight for; and most important
- (3) which, because it is -- to a Marxist -- obviously and blatantly incompatible with the status quo, will lead the masses who fight for it to the realization that they cannot achieve it without overturning the status quo. Then comes the revolutionary crisis.

This transitional period of education-through-struggle may be very short or very long, in large measure depending on how skilfully and energetically the revolutionists have thrown fuel on the movement. For a vanguard party to follow the tendency of the resolution's opponents (who yearn to by-pass the whole annoying process) means to make it very long.

And where no revolutionary party exists at all, the process cannot be very short. When O'Connor is confronted with the thought, he knows of course that this is the situation in Europe -- where revolutionary parties must still be re-born. But this fact plays no part in his thinking -- absolutely none.

This is ludicrously self-evident when he writes, under the subhead "The Time is Now!" --

"In Europe it is now that we must differentiate ourselves clearly from all bourgeois-nationalist elements and above all from the Stalinists. It is now that we must act with the utmost audacity in spreading our ideas among the workers -- in putting the face of the party before them...."

In Europe now (the repeated underlining is O'Connor's!) put the face of what party before them? "Put the face of the party before them" is O'Connor's simple prescription: but a revolutionary party is yet to be created. This is one of the problems before the European workers. With this "slip" of the pen O'Connor makes it unnecessary to prove what is typical of the opponents of the resolution: he has his feet firmly planted in air.

A MOTION TO REJECT THE AGENDA

In the NC resolution it is written that

"Fascism is reactionary (among other reasons) because it removes from the top of the order of the day, or tends to remove from the top of the order of the day the direct struggle for proletarian, socialist power, and to put in its place the historically outlived, anachronistic struggle "for democracy". To put it differently, it tends to replace at the top of the order of the day the direct struggle for social democracy (socialism) by the struggle for formal or political democracy, or for specific demands in the program of formal democracy." (N.I., February, p.8)

Naturally the statement of this fact provokes a concerted yell from Johnson's proponents and from O'Connor, who really act as if this were the first time it has been said. O'Connor even thinks he is criticizing the resolution when he points out that "The slogans of 'formal democracy' were the advancing slogans of the workers during the period of expanding capitalism -- not during the period of its decay," and this being so the principles of Marxism, presumably, forbid the raising of the slogans of political democracy!

The thinking here is so slipshod, superficial and mechanical one wonders how far back into the ABC one must go.

It is a fact that the European workers now are engaging actively and in mass in a progressive struggle for national liberation which has revolutionary implications. It is also a fact that there is no organized movement for socialist revolution now. The state of mind of the European worker may be summarized: Let us get rid of the foreign conqueror and then we will settle accounts with our own capitalists. It may be obviously and blatantly stupid of them to think so, but what does it place at the top of the agenda for the agitation of revolutionists?

The agenda in occupied Europe in 1943 is not the same as it was in Europe in 1934, when there were three nation-wide general strikes going on simultaneously, in three different countries, all of which are now dominated by foreign power.

The trouble with O'Connor is partly that he thinks of the European scene not in its concreteness but in terms solely of a generalized analysis of an historical era. "This is an era of imperialist wars and socialist revolutions" --

yes; that is why we believe that the role of the national question is temporary, even episodic, in the sense that insofar as it develops in struggle it pushes socialism to the top of the agenda.

But it does us no good merely to record our vote against the agenda as it is actually presented by the proletariat today.

Is the "direct struggle for proletarian, socialist power" at the top of the agenda in Europe today? One page after expressing his horror at the resolution's negative answer, O'Connor actually says the very same thing!

"Whatever the extent of their political development might be, the fight of the people in a conquered country cannot be directly for the seizure of power, for the dictatorship of the proletariat, as it can in a free country." (Page 7)

The formulation here is distinctly rightish and unacceptable, and the motivation for it which he adds has a decided reformist smack to it, but at any rate it leaves the top of the agenda in no doubt.

ON INTERVALS AND INTERLUDES

And lastly O'Connor raises the question of "perspective." He admits that it is "most probable" that the ousting of the Nazis will be immediately followed, not by soviets and socialist revolution, but by a transitional bourgeois regime. He approvingly quotes the NC resolution that this unstable "democratic interlude", made possible by elements of dual power, can last only for an interval. So far, so good. But he insists -- absolutely insists -- on limiting the duration of the interval to 12 months, tops.

The resolution, you see, is not quite so categoric. It mentions that the post-war democratic interlude cannot possibly last half the time that the democratic regime in Spain endured. "That makes it a full two and a half years," notes O'Connor.

It mentions that the post-war Weimar regime in Germany was so sickly it could not last out fifteen years -- "Now they're talking about fifteen years," groans O'Connor.

"What revolutionary optimism!" he comments sarcastically. For himself he cannot "seriously believe" that the transitional period can last for one year. After all, he reminds forcefully, Kerensky lasted only six months!

Yes, Kerensky lasted only six months. But in Germany, the post-war revolutionary period -- the period during which it was not yet decided whether the proletariat would take power or not -- lasted for six years! And in Italy -- five years! It was not until 1922-23 that the bourgeois regimes in these countries finally re-consolidated themselves and made clear that the revolutionary crisis was over. So much for the analytical value of O'Connor's optimism.

But it is not his shortcomings in the field of history that are as important as his final conclusion. It summarizes a political tendency.

HOW TO SHORTEN YOUR PERSPECTIVE

The N.C. program, he writes, "is one of democratic demands, free speech, free organization -- and above all national independence." One trusts he understands this "program" (i.e. agitational platform) is being presented for Europe today. In any case, he adds, underlining each word: "This program can only be justified if we are operating with a perspective of two to fifteen years of bourgeois democratic rule!"

Why?

Because in "a proletarian-revolutionary situation...only socialist revolutionary slogans and strategy are admissible."

In the six months during which Kerensky lasted, the Bolsheviks of course raised only socialist revolutionary slogans? Of course not. Besides peace, bread and land, their slogans were: constituent assembly, free organization, national self-determination (liberation!), etc. Not one of these is a socialist slogan, but because of the revolutionary situation, each was a revolutionary slogan in effect!

Kerensky lasted only for six months BECAUSE Lenin understood enough not to raise "only socialist-revolutionary slogans."

The German Weimar republic, however, teetered on the brink of revolution on and off for six years. Why so long? In large measure, because the majority of the Spartacists, against the advice of Luxemburg and Liebknecht whom they voted down time and again precisely on such questions, believed that "only socialist revolutionary slogans and strategy" were possible! In 1918 they rejected their two leaders' guidance on participating in the Weimar elections, on working with the reformist trade unions; in 1920 they at first even refused to support the general strike against the Kapp Putsch on the ground that they refused to defend a bourgeois-democratic regime; in 1921 a large section even split off to form the ultra-left Communist Labor Party.

This is why Kerensky lasted only six months and Weimar lasted 15 years. And O'Connor tries to refer to this history to justify the blind neo-revolutionism which helped to wreck the first post-war world revolution!

Whether the "democratic interlude" is short or long depends not on revolutionary optimism but on how well the revolutionists have assimilated the historical lessons about which O'Connor, like others, has read much and understood practically nothing. The NC resolution is an outstanding example of an application of Bolshevik strategy to a new world situation. That is its educational importance also.

* * *

429