An Open Letter.

By S. P. BUNTING.

DELEGATE TO THE COMMUNIST INTERNATIONAL, 1922.

Dear Comrades,

The attitude of some members to the accepted Commintern Policy on such matters as immediate or partial demands and, I gather, the United Front, as revealed at recent branch meetings I have attended, prompts me to try my hand at arguing them into accord with that policy. My excuse for presuming to write this letter is that a somewhat similar attitude was taken up by a few delegates to the Moscow Congress, and was, I think, as the result of the debates, successfully smoothed out; and I am now trying to reproduce the spirit of these debates.

"At one time," said Zinoviev in his report on the year's work, "it was essential to secure a rallying point for a genuine liberating movement of the working class, and this could only be done by the creation of a Communist Party . . . by splitting the old Social Democratic parties. . . . But our main problem now concerns the winning over of the majority of the workers. . . . That is why we have adopted the tactics of the United Front . . . i.e., not an electoral alliance, nor an organisatory union with the Social Democrats, but . . . the leading of the working masses in the daily class war. . . . For the very reason that we wish to fight on behalf of the proletarian revolution, we must participate in every strike, must go in advance of the working class and must fight on behalf of every partial demand. We are revolutionists . . . , we are opposed to reformism, but we are not opposed to anything that may improve the lot of the working class. We know quite well that in the extant conditions of capitalism the possibilities for such improvement are extremely restricted, we know that nothing but the revolution will secure a real uplifting of the workers; but we also know that we shall never be able to organise the workers unless we fight on behalf of their partial demands."

And in reply to those who say, "We have no time for this: we must reserve all our energies for propaganda in favour of the revolution," Zinoviev said: "He who feels for the working class, he who is not satisfied with a subjective attitude towards the masses, but on the contrary understands something about the lives of the workers and who has laboured in their ranks will reject such childishness"—or, to quote Lenin's phrase, such "infantile sickness"—for Lenin was dealing with similar tendencies. Similarly Bordiga, of the Italian party, said: "To organise the chaotic discontent into something capable of a revolutionary struggle is the great task." "The proper proletarian tactics," said Bukharin, "need not be either Right or Left; all it has to do is to adapt itself to the concrete conditions of the proletariat of the respective countries."

It is precisely on such grounds that the comrades I am arguing with have in the past opposed war, supported strikes, carried on free speech campaigns, attacked the Government about Bullhoek, clamoured for an amnesty for strike prisoners, and so on—all immediate or partial demands. We know, for instance, that war cannot be abolished except by abolishing capitalism; yet we preach war on war. We know that the white workers' insistence on wage standards at white rates cannot in the long run prevail against cheap labour competition under capitalism, yet we backed up their fight. When the Russian soldiers, peasant and workers in 1917 demanded peace and bread, did Lenin and Trotsky say to them, "Bread? Peace? Pish, tush, a miserable reformist demand! We are out for nothing less than the revolution"? No; they said, "We are with you, peace and bread you shall have"—and to-day they have both.

It is precisely because such demands, being perfectly proper demands in themselves, lead to the revolution, and in the present state of capitalism can, except to a trifling extent, only be realised by revolution (for once political power is captured the work of the dictatorship at once resolves itself into making reforms) that we identify ourselves with them. Not merely because by that means we are enabled to show the futility of reformism; that barren debating triumph no longer satisfies Communists; but because they are in themselves, in the circumstances, revolutionary demands. The class struggle in fact consists, it may almost be said, in the presentation of these demands by the workers and their refusal by the capitalists. After all, it is to gain these very demands that the revolution is wanted; for what is the revolution for if not to gain the things that the working class now lacks?

The fault of Reformism is not that it too supports these demands, but that it pretends to be able to satisfy them without revolution, claiming to be able "to mature Socialism in the lap of capitalism," and thus dissipating energy on trying to get reforms without it; nay, in modern times this has come to mean that its chief energy is an active and passionate opposition to the revolution, wholly in the interests of the other side. But it is grotesque to deduce from that error and that treachery that it is counter-revolutionary to support such demands or even to satisfy them under capitalism if a chance occurs. We are not here to say to the workers: "We forbid you to have bread prior to the revolution." The Communist Manifesto speaks with obvious approval of the securing of a ten hours' day in England, and in its last chapter it says: "The Communists fight for the attainment of the immediate and momentary aims and interests of the working class, but in the movement of the present they also defend the future of that movement." Exactly. And the chapter goes on to mention several cases of united front for particular objects, not only with labour but with bourgeois parties such as Nationalists, etc. The charge against the Second International, and here against the S.A. Labour Party, is not its support of daily demands, but the fact that in effect, in any crisis, being anti-revolutionary, it nearly always comes down on the side of the bourgeoisie and betrays the workers, until to-day, as Zinoviev says,—"it is the main prop of the bourgeoisie." If the Labour Party carried out its professions it would be unobjectionable, if insufficient. The Communist Party, with revolution as its prime aim, certainly endeavours to emphasise and intensify the struggle as such, the demands themselves, rather than any supposed remedies. It stimulates the thirst of the workers rather than offers them salt water drinks, as it were, to quench it. But if it happens on some fresh water it will of course give it, capitalism or no capitalism. The point may be put in this way: The Labour Party cannot really push these demands, because it is not revolutionary: the Communist Party can just because it is revolutionary.

The alternative to this real support of daily demands is, especially in times of crisis, not merely to ignore them or stand aloof from them, but to oppose them, in other words to support the other side—that is what it comes to—which I gather is more or less what some of those I am addressing actually did in connection with the Rand strike of last year. CAN THEY NOT SEE THAT THAT IS COMING DANGEROUSLY NEAR TO PLAYING TRAITOR TO THE WORKING CLASS, a crime far more unforgivable in Communists than even in the Labour Party?

This being so, there is nothing in the suggestion that you are deceiving the workers by supporting their demands. "Of course," said Domsky of Poland, a Leftist, at the Congress, "We must have slogans, either partial or ultimate, in which we believe ourselves, and for which we are ready to fight." That is, we believe in them because they are actually what the working class wants, and rightly wants; and if so, we cannot at the same time profess to disbelieve in them on the mere ground that they are reforms. Nevertheless, as Radek said (although he was speaking of the special slogan of a "Workers' Government," but his words apply generally), we have, and quite properly, to "lead the masses into the fight on the basis of their own illusions." No amount of mere propaganda, but only hard experience, will teach them that nowadays they cannot as a rule get even a sixpenny rise without a revolution unless as a bribe at the expense of other workers. Com. Andrews' letter suggesting that the miners would never learn except by bitter experience the insecurity of relying on the colour bar, which has been quoted by the Martial Law Commission as double-faced because Com. Andrews at the same time supported the miners' strike, was written in this spirit. The point is one which the Commission would naturally fail to understand.

Experience it must be. Mere preaching the revolution or Communist ideals, even mere warnings that reforms are unattainable under the present system, cut no ice; they notoriously fail to convince. Even to support the workers' demands of course does not at once enable them to understand you. But it is a necessary introduction. If we do not take up their daily demands we shall not get their support for the revolution. Fred Cetyiwe, who was a prominent and faithful member of the native study class, developing into the "Industrial Workers of Africa," in connection with which he and I and others were arrested in 1918, told Com. Dryburgh and me the other day that he realised that merely to preach the principles of Socialism to the native workers was ineffective. "Take an interest in our sufferings," he said, "and then, and not before, we shall listen to what you have to say." He had caught the essence of the Commintern spirit—or rather he showed that the Commintern had caught the true working class spirit. The mass of the workers are apathetic. We must penetrate their apathy to pull them out of it. We must make use of every spark of class feeling we can find in them to turn it to clear-sighted class-consciousness. We must get into them, not drily appeal as "absentees," from outside, to them to join us.

It is simply reformist to suggest that the old-fashioned propaganda methods of thirty years ago are sufficient to-day in face of a greatly intensified capitalist offensive. Soap boxes and street-corner crowds are all very well—and they are highly "constitutional" methods, by the way—but additional serious, intense and daring methods of propaganda, as well as more organisation of followers, and especially "permeation" of existing workers' organisations, are required to-day if the interest and confidence of the majority are to be won, and they are to be prepared for seizing power. The United Front is one of these methods: that is, not to pretend to labour leaders that we are with them, but to concentrate from time to time on some demand of the masses and enlist general support for it. And the opposition of "Labour" to the United Front shows that they fear it as a weapon, for it hurts them, not us—it strengthens us. Mere bragging that we are revolutionists does not bring us any nearer effecting the revolution. It is a question of working people up, preparing the offensive, providing a rallying point for the apathetic, getting the workers' confidence, and preventing them from invertebrately supporting the S.A.L.P.—or even the S.A.P.—for majorities have proved to be very hard to win over to our side. This does not involve endorsing their misconceptions, still less joining their false political parties; it is simply a question of "penetration." If there is any danger of this becoming, in the case of individuals, "absorption," it is the business of the party to prevent that from happening.

It was owing to this necessity of learning by experience that Lenin advised the British Communist Party to support the Labour Party's rise to power. On similar grounds the Commintern urges its sections to put representatives into Parliament, just as the Bolsheviks went into the Duma, and later, under Kerensky, cried "All power to the Soviets," though the Soviets were then still Menshevik. It is experience, it is the course of events, not preaching, or "pointing out" or verbal grave-digging of capitalism, that brings on the revolution. Similarly, national liberation movements of subject or colonial peoples, though bourgeois and often reactionary, are supported by Communists not only because of their weakening effect on imperialism, but also because only a nationalist success convinces the masses of the futility of Nationalism.

To hold aloof from daily demands is to reduce the movement to a contentless abstraction like the "Thing In Itself" of some old-fashioned English philosophers. "Strip a thing of all its qualities as being mere adventitious attributes," they said, "and contemplate only the pure entity"; the result being—nonentity, something quite fleshless and meaningless, like Struwwel Peter who wouldn't eat his dinner, and became a mere set of straight lines. As for the view that the Social Revolution is not the work of the working class at all, I find myself unable even to argue with it.

Let us not be so presumptuous as to despise the experience of that greatest of Communist Parties, the Russian, which has an elaborate programme, including transition demands, just as the Soviet Government has, quite properly, had to bow to the demands of the peasantry in order to win them over. The German party, too, is constantly concentrating on such demands, and endeavouring to form a United Front on them, e.g., in the case of the Trade Unions' twelve demands which it recently fell to the Party to hold the trade unions themselves to.

Above all, of course, is the combined wisdom of the Commintern itself, based on the experience not of one or two countries only, but of all the countries represented at its congresses. This matter of interim demands was the subject of a special representation from Lenin, Trotsky, Zinoviev, and Bukharin at the Congress, which eventually resolved, after much discussion, unanimously as follows, inter alia:

"All the national sections of the Communist International, which are as yet without a national programme must at once take in hand the elaboration of such a programme which must be submitted to the E.C.C.I. . . . for endorsement by the next Congress.

"The necessity of the struggle for the transition demands must be emphasised in the programmes of the national sections, with the reservation that such demands are dependent on the concrete conditions of time and place.

"The theoretic basis for all transition and partial demands must be definitely laid down in the general programme, the Fourth Congress strongly condemning all attempts to represent the inclusion on the transition demands into the programme as opportunism, and also all attempts to gloss over or to replace the basic revolutionary task by partial demands.

"The basic historic types of the transition demands of the national sections must be clearly embodied in the general programme, due account being taken of the basic differences in the economic and political structure of the various countries, e.g., Great Britain on the one hand, India on the other."

Hence it is almost incumbent on our party to accept this view as a matter of discipline; and Commintern discipline becomes a more important matter every year, every month. It was noticeable how at the Congress one party after another would say: "Yes, the United Front, etc., is all very well for other parties, but not for us"; but no one else ever agreed with them, not even those who made the same claim about their own country, each thought his own country exceptional, but all the rest normal; and the result was that the Congress turns them all down and exempted nobody.

It has been said: "Oh, yes, Crawford used to talk that way, about reaching the workers by taking up their immediate demands, and look where he has landed." The answer is that Crawford has become a crook, and has not only glossed over or replaced the basic revolutionary task by partial demands, but now opposes even these demands in the interest of the enemy. The Communist Party cannot proceed as if it consisted of crooks, and even if it tended to do so, its discipline, its prestige should suffice to prevent it from breeding Crawfords. After all, we are not individuals each following his own sweet will; we are members one of another, and are kept straight by the whole movement. It is because of that necessarily solidarity in our party that the danger of maintaining opposition groups in a branch, which may largely paralyse its work, must be so strenuously resisted.

Let us drop the bigotry which dates from older days, when the Socialist movement was more of a debating society, and consequently bred splits, left and right wings, and so on. The Communist International is leaving all that behind. The age of splits, said Zinoviev at the Congress, is almost over, and I think that at future congresses even less will be heard of Leftit and Rightist than I heard at the Fourth Congress, which was little enough. It was chiefly the small and ineffective parties out of touch with the masses, like that of America, that emphasised divisions of this kind. In the Russian Party, for instance, I saw no trace of it; it is simply a fable of the enemy press. To-day the Commintern is an engine, a conquering force. It is not based on the mere ratiocinations of utopians, often not belonging to the working class and sometimes therefore liable, owing to their business exigencies, to be actually biassed against it, so much so that they are even heard to say: "Don't go with the masses, or they will drag you into the gutter"! It is based on the inevitable and irresistible revolutionary movement of those very masses. It is a power which is determined to win the world in our day. It should be our privilege, not to stand on a Capetown dunghill and crow that we know better, but to march in solidarity with it to win the world victory we all desiderate.

Yours fraternally,

S. P. BUNTING.

AN OPEN LETTER—Continued.

P.S.—Just because the Party must go right into the masses it must keep its own quality of membership up to the highest possible mark. It is there that "purity" is necessary. Our members must be, to the last man, "unspotted from the world." This again was not so necessary in the old debating society days, but it is vital now. Beware of admitting Crawfords or Atkinsons. Let our propaganda go into the market place, but let our propagandists, that is every one of our members, be all the more for that reason above suspicion, known and tried trustworthy men. The propaganda is for all to hear; the party business and tactics may at any time be, as those of our enemies are, highly confidential. We can afford to take no risks. We are a camp; we cannot chance having traitors in it. Membership should, as in Russia, be an honour to be coveted, yet also a position of trust, of danger, of self-sacrifice at which cowards should flinch. If it were doubtful before, the lesson of the Rand strike, which was honeycombed and controlled by spies and provocateurs, should convince us now of the necessity of knowing our comrades, the necessity of "quality in a Communist Party."

S. P. B.

COMMUNIST PARTY NOTES.

JOHANNESBURG BRANCH.

Dates of meetings: April 12th and 26th, May 10th and 24th, June 7th and 21st.

All subscriptions are now due, and can be paid to Assist. Treasurer at 4, Trades Hall, before the annual meeting.

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SPRINGS.

The first public meeting under the auspices of the reorganised Springs Branch was held last Sunday, in the Lyric Bioscope, Springs. Comrade T. Allen, the Mayor of Springs, presided, and Comrade W. H. Andrews, General Secretary of the Party, gave an address on the aims and objects of the Communists. There was a good audience, and the general feeling was that a series of similar meetings should be held during the winter months.

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MAY DAY SOCIAL.

Tickets for the Grand Social to be held in the Town Hall on Monday, 30th April, are on sale at 4, Trades Hall, 2s. 6d. each. The next meeting of the General May Day Committee will be held in the General Office on Sunday, April 8th, at 3 p.m.

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CAPETOWN.

Branch meeting every Tuesday at 8 p.m., at 166, Longmarket Street. Syllabus of lectures:

April 5—"The Theory of Exchange." I. Shack.
" 12—"Capitalism in Fiction." H. Pereira.
" 19—"Trade Unionism, Syndicalism, and Communism." J. Pick.
" 26—"Socialism and the Press." D. L. Dryburgh.

May 3—Musical Evening.
" 10—"The Federation of Trades and Their Wages Bill." W. Green.
" 17—"Women and Socialism." I. Schack.

Adult Choir meets Mondays at 8 p.m.

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Comrade Mrs. Bourke.

News has reached this office that Comrade Mrs. Bourke has safely arrived in Sydney, and has made the acquaintance of the local Communists. She sends her love to all comrades.

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