

Class collaboration - old and new, and Open letter to the CNT, 1937



"Class collaboration - old and new", a timely reminder of working class political experience by Joseph Wagner, and A. Shapiro's Open letter to the CNT which criticised its actions during the Spanish Civil War.

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Alone, or in coalition with more or less "liberal" bourgeois political parties, the socialists today are in control of the government machinery in a number of countries while yet in other countries they stand in line awaiting in their turn the call of the economic masters to take over the government and to carry on and administer the collective affairs of the capitalists in the respective countries.

The conclusion of the long and destructive World War brought capitalism to bankruptcy, the bourgeois regime stood everywhere discredited physically and morally and in a state of collapse ; everywhere the working class was in open revolt. The only organized force that yet retained some moral prestige was the socialist movement and its trade unions, who, in one country after another gallantly rushed to the rescue of the moribund regime, until recently their professed enemy.

Naturally, the capitalists very graciously allowed the socialists to resurrect and reconstruct the capitalist regime. They were allowed and even invited to form "socialist governments." Times without number these "socialist governments" proved to the master class that they are in the best of positions to save capitalism and to safeguard all their interests not only by the use of brutal military and police forces, but also by their moral prestige over the working class acquired by nearly a century of socialist party and trade union connection within the working class.

To be sure the master class never was conspicuous by its gratitude, as soon as it imagined itself strong enough to rule without the aid of socialists these were discarded, and their governments turned over to the underworld characters, to gangsters parading in differently colored shirts. A few years of experience with the gangsterdom has, however, taught world capitalism the lesson that the socialists make the more efficient and loyal servants of capitalism after all, and at the present time the pendulum is rapidly swinging away from fascism to "socialist" or "Popular Front" governments.

Socialists the world over are proud of the role their parties are playing nowadays, and they look upon their present, internationally approved policy as the acme of "Marxism." Yet, this was not always so.

Before the end of the last century, socialists of all shades were violently and unalterably opposed to the very idea of party members participating in bourgeois (capitalist) governments, thereby making the socialist movement at least indirectly responsible for the acts of their respective capitalist governments. Even the acceptance by a party member of a minor, non-elective government job, was frowned upon as not kosher from a social-democratic standpoint.

When, in 1900, Alexander Millerand, who with Jean Jaures, was heading one of the four or five socialist parties existing then in France, entered into the Waldeck-Rousseau cabinet, a storm of protests was raised in the socialist world. National and World Congresses debated and argued the propriety of the action and in all instances the act was condemned as treason to the international socialist movement. "Millerandism" and "Ministerialism" was synonymous with treason. The arguments lasted for fourteen years, until the outbreak of the World War, when the entire socialist world suddenly became "ministerialists" and governmentals. And so it has remained to this day.

The foregoing is all old history, but it does no harm to recall it once in a while, the more so as in our days we are suddenly confronted with a new "ministerialism" from an unexpected source. This time the anarchist world is stirred with that same old question in the anti-fascist war now going on in Spain.

It would appear that with the post-war experiences, with the experiences of Bolshevism, Fascism, Nazism, we have learned enough to avoid the old and settled disputes. But we must have been mistaken, for it seems that we have to overcome the same difficulties and misunderstandings at every instance of serious fight that we, the working class, are confronted with.

The old forgotten "Millerandism" or "Ministerialism" is and has been a burning issue in Spain ever since the present war was precipitated by the uniformed bandits of Spain. The only real revolutionary force in the present Spanish war was the CNT and its ideological reflex, the F.A.I. It would have appeared an absurdity for anyone a year ago to state that the old issue of "ministerialism" could bob up—of all things—in this anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist movement, in the time of the acutest crisis that ever confronted not only these two Spanish movements (that are really one), but the anarchist fraternity the world over.

Perseus, of mythological fame, wore a magic cap so that the monsters he hunted down might not see him. I would like to have pulled such a magic cap over my own ears so that I may not see the internal fight in the revolutionary forces of the present Spanish fight. Unfortunately, I can read many languages and am in touch with revolutionary literature of many lands, and no magic cap can prevent me from seeing things I would not like to see. I am giving below a translation of an open letter of A. Shapiro to the CNT I read similar open letters months ago, whose authors have fallen since, either fighting on the bloody battlefields, or through cowardly assassination by the Spanish Branch of the Russian Cheka. Shapiro is not dead yet, he is one of the outstanding figures of the anarchist movement of the world. He was for a number of years one of the Secretariat of the International Workingmens Association. Therefore, whatever the readers of the "One Big Union" may think of his statements, I assure them that Shapiro is sincere and means what he says.

Open letter to the CNT

We read with more surprise than interest the minimal program of the CNT "for the realization of a real war policy." The reading of the program raised an entire series of questions and problems, some of which should be called to your attention.

Certainly none of us was simple enough to believe that a war can be carried on with resolutions and by anti-militarist theories. Many of us believed, long before July 19 (1936) that the anti-militarist propaganda, so dear to our Dutch comrades of the International Anti-militarist Bureau and which found, in the past, a sympathetic enough echo in the columns of your press in Spain, was in contradiction with the organization of the revolution.

Many of us knew that the putsches, that were so dear to our Spanish comrades, such as those of December 8 and January 8, 1934, were far from helping this organization of the revolution, it helped rather to disorganize it.

July 19 opened your eyes. It made you realize the mistake you had committed in the past, when, in a revolutionary period, you neglected Seriously organizing the necessary framework for the struggle that you knew would be inevitable on the day of the settlement of accounts. Yet, today you are shutting your eyes on another important fact. You seem to think that a civil war brought about by the circumstance of a fascist putsch does not necessarily obligate you to examine the possibilities of modifying and altering the character of that civil war.

A "minimal" program is not something to startle us ; but a particular minimal program (such as yours) cannot have any value unless it creates the opportunity for the preparation of a maximal program.

But, your "real war policy," after all, is nothing but a program for entering the Council of Ministry (government) ; with it you act merely as a political party desirous of participation in an existing government ; setting forth your conditions of participation, and these conditions are so bureaucratic in character that they are far from weakening in the least the bourgeois capitalist regime, on the contrary they are tending to strengthen capitalism and stabilize it.

The surprising part of your program is that you do not consider it as a means for the attainment of some well defined goal, but consider your "real war policy" program as an aim in itself. That is the main danger in your program. It presupposes a permanent participation in the government—not merely circumstantial—which is to extend over a number of years, even if the war itself, with its brutal, daily manifestations would cease in the meanwhile. A monopoly of the Foreign Commerce (have the communists whispered this to you ?), customs policy, new legislations, a new penal code—all of this takes a long time. In order to realize these tasks, your program proposes a very close collaboration on all fields with the bourgeoisie (republican block) and with the communists (marxist block), while almost at the same time you state in your appeal of June 14 that you are sure of triumphing not only against Franco, but also against a stupidly backward bourgeoisie ("the republican block") and against the tricky and dishonest politicians ("marxist block").

You see, therefore, that even your minimal program is beset with flagrant contradictions ; its realization is dependent on the aid of the very sectors against which that program is aimed. Even the freedom with which you state these two mutually excluding programs : collaboration with the bourgeoisie and "marxism" on the one hand and fight to finish against

this same bourgeoisie and "marxism" on the other, situates your minimal program as the aim, and your declaration of June 14 becomes a mere verbiage. We would have, naturally, liked to see things the other way.

The problem of Spain's economic reconstruction does not form a part of your program. And yet, you cannot help but know that a civil war, like the one you are going through, cannot bring the people to its aid unless the victories on the fronts will assure at the same time their own victories in the rear.

It is true—and many of us outside of Spain have known it long before July 19—the Social Revolution cannot be attained in 24 hours, and that a libertarian regime cannot be erected by the turn of the hand. Nevertheless, neither the CNT nor the F.A.I. cared anything about pre-revolutionary organization and about preparing in advance the framework for the social and economic reconstruction. We claim that there is a bridge leading from the downfall of the old regime to the erection of the new regime erected on the ashes and the ruins of the old regime. This bridge is all the more full of dangerous traps and pitfalls as the new regime differs from the old. And it was precisely this period of transition that you have misunderstood in the past and that you continue to misunderstand today. For if you had recognized that the social and economic reconstruction on a libertarian basis is the indispensable condition to victory over fascism, you would have elaborated (having in view the aim to be attained) a minimal revolutionary program that would have given the city and country proletariat of Spain the necessary will and enthusiasm to continue the war to its logical conclusion.

But such a program you failed to proclaim. The few timid allusions contained in your "war program" are far from having a revolutionary character : the elaboration of a plan for the economic reconstruction that would be accepted by the three blocks could only be a naive illusion, if it would not be so dangerous ; the municipalization of land is an anti-revolutionary project since it legalizes something that a coming revolution will have to abolish, since the municipalities are, after all, but cogs in the wheel of the State as long as the State will exist.

Naturally, the elaboration of an economic program for the transition period presupposes a final aim. Does the CNT consider that libertarian communism is an unattainable "Utopia" that should be relegated to the museum ?

If you still think (as you did before July 19) that libertarian communism forms part of the program of the CNT it is your duty—it was really your duty since July 1936—to elaborate your economic program of transition, without regard to the bourgeois and marxist blocks, who can but sabotage any program of libertarian tendency and inspiration.

To be sure, such a program will place you in conflict with these blocks, but on the other hand, it will unite with you the large majority of the workers, who want but one thing, the victory of the Revolution. It is necessary, therefore to choose between these two eventualities.

Such a program will, naturally, nullify your "war program" which is nothing but the expression of a "true" desire for a permanent cabinet collaboration. But this proposition, this "war program" of yours is diametrically contrary to the traditionally revolutionary attitude of the CNT, which this organization has not denied yet. It is therefore necessary to choose.

The CNT should not allow—as it has unfortunately done since July 19—the acceptance of the tactics of the "line of least resistance," which cannot but lead to a slow but sure liquidation of the libertarian revolution.

The ministerial collaboration policy has certainly pushed back to the rear the program of revolutionary economy. You are on the wrong track and you can see that yourselves.

Do you not think that you should stop following this road, that leads you to certain downfall ?

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