

INTRODUCTION

There are large numbers of revolutionary workers, as well as an even larger number now awakening to political life and activity, who know practically nothing of the vast store of concentrated revolutionary teaching contained in the Theses and Resolutions of the Communist International.

The re-publication of the Thesis of the Second Congress of the Communist International on "The Role of the Communist Party in the Proletarian Revolution" is of enormous importance for us to-day. The Second Congress took place in 1920, when the workers of Europe were engaged in big class battles for power following the victory of the workers' dictatorship in what had been the Empire of the Russian Tsar.

The Thirteenth Plenum of the Communist International, held recently, declared that: "The objective pre-requisites for a revolutionary crisis have matured to such an extent that at the present time the world is closely approaching a new round of revolutions and wars."

Therefore, the need of an understanding of the role of the Communist Party as the leadership of the workers in the decisive class battles which face us is of vital importance.

This Thesis could have been written yesterday, so aptly does it characterise the urgent tasks at the present moment.

We have just celebrated the Tenth Anniversary of the death of Lenin and the Fifteenth Anniversary of the foundation of the Communist International. To-day we are witnessing the triumph of Socialist construction in the Soviet Union under the leadership of the Bolshevik Party and are able to record tremendous advances in the growth, influence, and Bolshevisation of the Sections of the Communist International all over the capitalist world. This document will serve to strengthen the hands of all revolutionary workers in that it will make for greater clarity on the gigantic tasks which confront us. It will assist in the process of attracting to Communism the cream of the British working class.

Unfortunately we cannot print the document in full. We are living under a capitalist dictatorship that denies free speech to the working class. When this document was first published a prosecution and a prison sentence followed. Sen-

tences or words deleted in this reprint are indicated by asterisks (***) . The fact that capitalist governments fear this document is in itself a good reason for reading it, and we feel that even in its present form it will be of value.

M. N., March, 1934.

THE ROLE OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY IN THE PROLETARIAN REVOLUTION

Thesis of the Second Congress of the Communist International

The international proletariat is confronted with decisive battles. We are living in an epoch of civil war. The critical hour has struck. In almost all countries where there is a labour movement of any importance the working class, arms in hand, stands in the midst of fierce and decisive battles. Now, more than ever, is the working class in need of a strong organisation. Without losing an hour of invaluable time, the working class must indefatigably prepare for the impending decisive struggle.

The first heroic uprising of the French proletariat during the Paris Commune of 1871 would have been much more successful, and many errors and shortcomings would have been avoided, had there been a strong Communist Party, no matter how small. The struggle which the proletariat is now facing, under changed historical circumstances, will be of much more vital importance to the future destiny of the working class than was the insurrection of 1871.

The Second World Congress of the Communist International therefore calls upon the revolutionary workers of the whole world to concentrate all their attention on the following:—

1. The Communist Party is part of the working class, namely, its most advanced, intelligent, and therefore most revolutionary part. The Communist Party is formed of the best, most intelligent, self-sacrificing and far-seeing workers. The Communist Party has no other interests than those of the working class. It differs from the general mass of the workers in that it takes a general view of the whole historical march of the working class, and at all turns of the road it endeavours to defend the interests, not of separate groups or professions, but of the working class as a whole. The Communist Party is the organised political lever by means of which the more advanced section of the working class leads the whole proletarian and semi-proletarian mass.

2. Until the power of government has been finally conquered by the proletariat, until the proletariat has established its supremacy beyond the possibility of a bourgeois restoration,

the Communist Party will have in its organised ranks only a minority of workers. Until the seizure of power, and during the transition period, the Communist Party may, under favourable conditions, exercise undisputed moral and political influence on all the proletarian and semi-proletarian elements of the population, but it will not be able to unite them within its ranks. Only when the dictatorship of the workers has deprived the bourgeoisie of such powerful weapons as the Press, the school, parliament, the church, the governmental machinery, etc., only when the final overthrow of the capitalist order is an evident fact—only then will all, or almost all, the workers enter the ranks of the Communist Party.

3. A sharp distinction must be drawn between the conception of “party” and “class.” The members of the “Christian” and Liberal trade unions of Germany, England, and other countries, undoubtedly form sections of the working class. More or less considerable sections of the working people, followers of Scheidemann, Gompers and Co., are likewise part of the working class. Under certain historical conditions the working class is very likely to be impregnated with numerous reactionary elements. The task of Communism is not to adapt itself to such retrograde elements, but to raise the whole working class to the level of the Communist vanguard. The confusion of these two conceptions— of party and of class—can only lead to the greatest errors and chaos. Thus, for instance, it is clear that, notwithstanding the disposition or prejudices of certain sections of the working class during the imperialist war, the workers' parties ought to have counteracted these prejudices, defending the historical interests of the proletariat, which demanded of the proletarian parties a declaration of war against war.

Thus, at the beginning of the imperialist war of 1914, the social traitors of all countries, in upholding the capitalists of their “own” countries, unanimously declared that such was the will of the people. They forgot at the same time that even if this were so, the duty of the workers' party was to combat such an attitude on the part of the majority of the workers, and to defend the interests of the workers at whatever cost. At the very beginning of the twentieth century the Russian Mensheviks of the time (the so-called “economists”) denied the possi-

bility of an open political struggle against Tsarism, on the ground that the working class in general had not attained to an understanding of the political struggle. So also the right wing of the Independents of Germany, in its compromising, has referred constantly to the “will of the masses,” failing to understand that the party exists precisely for the purpose of marching ahead of the masses and pointing out the way.

4. The Communist International is firmly convinced that the collapse of the old “Social Democratic” parties of the Second international cannot be represented as a collapse of the proletarian party organisations in general. The period of open struggle for the dictatorship of the workers has created a new proletarian party—the Communist Party.

5. The Communist International emphatically rejects the view that the workers can carry out a revolution without having an independent political party of their own. Every class struggle is a political struggle. The object of this struggle, which inevitably develops ***, is to obtain political power. But this power cannot be acquired, organised and directed otherwise than by means of a political party. Only when the workers have for their guide an organised and experienced party, with strictly defined objects, and a practically drawn up programme of immediate action, both in internal and foreign policy—then only will the acquisition of political power cease to be an accidental episode, but serve as a starting point.

This class struggle likewise demands that the general guidance or the various forms of the proletarian movement (trade unions, co-operative associations, educational work, elections, etc.) shall be united in one central organisation. Only a political party can act as a unifying and guiding centre of this kind. To refuse to create and strengthen such a party and submit to its dictates, would mean to abandon the idea of unity in the guidance of the separate proletarian groups operating in the different arenas of the struggle. Lastly, the class struggle of the proletariat demands a concentrated propaganda, throwing light on the various stages of the fight, giving a single point of view, and directing the attention of the proletariat at each given moment to the definite tasks to be accomplished by the whole class. This cannot be done without the help of a centralised political apparatus, *i.e.*, a political party. Therefore the

propaganda of the revolutionary Syndicalists, and the partisans of the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.), against the necessity of an Independent Workers' Party, as a matter of fact has only served and continues to serve the interests of the bourgeoisie and the counter-revolutionary "Social-Democrats." In their propaganda against the Communist Party, which the Syndicalists and Industrialists desire to replace by the labour unions, they approximate to opportunists. After the defeat of the revolution in 1905 the Russian Mensheviks for several years proclaimed the necessity of a so-called Labour Congress, which was to replace the revolutionary party of the working class. All kinds of "Labourists" in England and America, while consciously carrying on a bourgeois policy, are propagating among the workers the idea of creating indefinite, shapeless "workers' unions" instead of a political party. The revolutionary Syndicalists and Industrialists desire to struggle against the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, but they do not know how to do it. They do not see that the working class without an independent political party is like a body without a head.

Revolutionary Syndicalism and Industrialism constitute a step forward only in comparison with the old, musty, counter-revolutionary ideology of the Second International. But in comparison with revolutionary Marxism, *i.e.*, with Communism, Syndicalism and Industrialism are a step backward. The declaration made by the "left" Communist Labour Party of Germany (in the programme-declaration of their Constituent Congress in April) to the effect that they are forming a party, but not one in the traditional sense of the word ("Keine Partei im überlieferten Sinne")—is a capitulation to those views of Syndicalism and Industrialism which are reactionary. The working class cannot achieve victory over the bourgeoisie by means of the general strike alone, and by the policy of folded arms. *** Understanding this, it becomes clear that an organised political party is absolutely essential, and that shapeless labour organisations will not suffice.

The revolutionary Syndicalists frequently advance the idea of the great importance of a determined revolutionary minority. The Communist Party is just such a determined minority of the working class, which is ready to act, which has a programme and strives to organise the masses for the struggle.

6. The most important task confronting a genuine Communist Party is to preserve constantly the closest contact with the general mass of the workers. For that purpose the Communists must carry on activity also within such organisations which are non-partisan, but which comprise large proletarian groups, for example, organisations of ex-Service men in various countries, the "Hands Off Russia" Committee in England, proletarian Tenants' Unions, and so forth. Of special importance are the so-called non-party conferences of workers and peasants held in Russia. Such conferences are being organised almost in every town, in all industrial districts, and in the country. In the elections to these conferences the general mass even of the most backward workers take part. The order of business at these conferences is made up of the most pressing questions, such as the food question, the housing problem, the military situations, and the education question. The Communists exercise their influence on these non-party conferences in the most energetic manner, and with the greatest success for the party. They consider it their most important task to carry on the work of organisation and instruction within such bodies. But in order that their efforts shall bring forth the desired results, and that such organisations shall not become the prey of opponents of the revolutionary proletariat, the most advanced Communist workers must always have their own independent, closely-united Communist Party, working in an organised manner, and standing up for the general interests of Communism at each turn of events, and under every form of the movement.

7. The Communists have no fear of the mass workers' organisations which belong to no party, even when they are of an openly reactionary nature ("yellow" unions, "Christian" unions, etc.). The Communist Party carries on its work inside such organisations, and untiringly instructs the workers, and proves to them that the idea of "no political party" as a principle is consciously fostered among the workers by the bourgeoisie and its adherents, with the object of keeping the proletariat from an organised struggle for Socialism.

8. The old "classical" division of the Labour movement into three forms (party, trade unions and co-operatives) has obviously outlived its time. The proletarian revolution in Russia

has brought forward the fundamental form of the workers' dictatorship—the Soviets. The new divisions which are now everywhere forming are: Party, Soviet, and Industrial Union. But the party of the proletariat, that is to say, the Communist Party, must constantly and systematically direct the work of the Soviets as well as of the revolutionised industrial unions. The Communist Party, the organised vanguard of the working class, must direct the struggle of the whole class on the economic and the political fields, and also on the field of education. It must be the animating spirit in the industrial unions, labour councils, and all other forms of proletarian organisation. The appearance of the Soviets is an historically basic form of the dictatorship of the proletariat in no way lessens the guiding role of the Communist Party in the proletarian revolution. The assertions made by the “Left” Communists of Germany (in their appeal to the German proletariat of April 14th, 1920, signed—“The Communist Labour Party of Germany”) that the party must always adapt itself to the idea of the Soviets and assume a proletarian character, is nothing but a hazy expression of the opinion that the Communist Party should dissolve itself into the Soviets, and that the Soviets can replace the Communist Party. This idea is essentially reactionary. There was a period in the history of the Russian Revolution when the Soviets were acting in opposition to the party, and supported the policy of the agents of the bourgeoisie. The same has happened in Germany, and may take place in other countries. In order that the Soviets may be able to perform their historic mission, a party of staunch Communists is necessary, who will not merely adapt themselves to the Soviets, but, on the contrary, will take care that the Soviets do not adapt themselves to the bourgeoisie, and to the White Guard Social-Democracy; so that, with the aid of the Communist fractions in the Soviets, the latter will be brought under the banner of the Communist Party. Those who propose that the Communist Party should “adapt” itself to the Soviets, those who perceive in such “adaptation” a strengthening of the “proletarian character” of the party, are rendering a bad service both to the party and to the Soviets, and do not understand the importance of the party, nor that of the Soviets. The stronger the Communist Party in each country, the sooner will the Soviet idea be victo-

rious. Many “Independent” and even “right” Socialists profess to believe in the Soviet idea. We shall only prevent such elements distorting this idea if there exists a strong Communist Party, capable of determining the policy of the Soviets and making them follow it.

9. The Communist Party is necessary to the working class not only before it has acquired power, not only while it is acquiring such power, but also after the power has passed into the hands of the working class. The history of the Russian Communist Party, for three years at the head of such a vast country,, shows that the role of the party, after the acquisition of power by the working class, has not only not diminished, but, on the contrary, has greatly increased.

10. On the morrow of the acquisition of power by the proletariat its party still remained, as formerly, a part of the working class. But it was just that part of the class which organised the victory. During 20 years in Russia and for a number of years in Germany the Communist Party, in its struggle not only against the bourgeoisie, but also against those Socialists who transmit bourgeois ideas to the proletariat, has enrolled in its ranks the staunchest, most far-seeing and advanced fighters of the working class. Only by having such a closely united organisation of the best section of the working class is it possible for the party to overcome all the difficulties which arise before the proletarian dictatorship on the morrow of victory. The organisation of a new proletarian Red Army, the practical abolition of the bourgeois governing apparatus, and the building in its place of the framework of a new proletarian State apparatus, the struggle against the narrow craft tendencies of certain separate groups of workers, the struggle against local and provincial “patriotism,” the clearing of the way for a new labour discipline—in all these undertakings the final, decisive word belongs to the Communist Party, whose members, by their own living example, guide the majority of the workers.

11. The necessity of a political party for the proletariat can cease only with the complete abolition of classes. On the way to this final victory of Communism it is possible that the relative importance of the three fundamental proletarian organisations of modern times (party, Soviets and Industrial Unions) will undergo some changes, and that gradually a single type of

workers' organisation will be formed. The Communist Party, however, will become absorbed in the working class only when Communism ceases to be the object of struggle, and the whole working class shall have become Communist.

12. The Second Congress of the Communist International must not only serve to establish the historical mission of the Communist Party generally, but it must indicate to the international proletariat, in general terms, what kind of Communist Party is needed.

13. The Communist International considers that, especially during the period of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the Communist Party must be organised on the basis of strict proletarian centralism. In order to lead the working class successfully during ***, the Communist Party must establish the strictest military discipline within its own ranks. The experience of the Russian Communist Party in its successful leadership *** of the working class during three years has proved that the victory of the workers is impossible without a severe discipline, a perfected centralisation and the fullest confidence of all the party organisations in the guiding party centre.

14. The Communist Party must be based on the principle of democratic centralisation. The chief principle of the latter is the election of the upper party units by those immediately below, the unconditional subordination of subordinate units to the decisions of those above them, and a strong party centre, whose decrees are binding upon all the leaders of party life between party conventions.

15. In view of the state of siege introduced by the bourgeoisie against the Communists, a whole series of Communist Parties in Europe and America are compelled to exist illegally. It must be remembered that under such conditions it may become necessary, sometimes temporarily, to deviate from the strict observance of the elective principle, and to delegate to the leading party organisations the right of co-optation, as was done in Russia at one time. Under the state of siege the Communist Party cannot have recourse to a democratic referendum among all the members of the party (as was proposed by part of the American Communists), but, on the contrary, must empower its executive centre to make important decisions in emergencies on behalf of all the members of the party.

16. The doctrine of wide “autonomy” for the separate local organisations of the party at the present moment only weakens the Communist Party, undermines its working capacity, and aids the development of petty bourgeois, anarchistic, centrifugal tendencies.

17. In countries where the power is in the hands of the bourgeoisie or the counter-revolutionary Social-Democrats, the Communist Party must learn to co-ordinate *** work; but all work must be carried on under the practical control of the legal party. The parliamentary groups of Communists, both in the central as well as in the local government institutions, must be absolutely and entirely subject to the Communist Party in general, irrespective of whether the party as a whole be a legal or an illegal organisation at the moment. Any deputy who in one way or another does not submit absolutely to the party shall be expelled from the ranks of the Communists. The legal Press (newspapers, publications) must be unconditionally and entirely subject to the party in general, and to its Central Committee. No concessions are admissible in this respect.

18. The fundamental basis of all the organising work of the Communist Party and individual Communists must be the creation of Communist groups wherever they find proletarians and semi-proletarian—although even in small numbers. In every Soviet of Workers’ Deputies, in every government institution, everywhere, even though there may be *only* three people sympathising with Communism, Communist groups must be immediately organised. It is only the organisation of the Communists that enables the advance guard of the working class to be the leader of the whole class. Communist groups working in organisations adhering to no political party must be subject to the party organisation as a whole, whether the party itself is working legally *or* illegally at the given moment. Communist groups of all kinds must be subordinated one to another in a strictly hierarchical order and system.

19. The Communist Party almost always begins its work among the industrial workers residing for the most part in the towns. For the rapid victory of the working class it is necessary that the party should also work in the villages. The Communist Party must carry on its propaganda and organising work among the agricultural labourers and the small farmers. It

must especially endeavour to organise Communist groups in the rural districts. The international organisation of the proletariat will be strong only if in all the countries where the Communists are living and working the above principles of party organisation and activity are firmly established. The Communist International invites to its Congress all trade unions which accept the principles of the Third International, and are ready to break with the yellow” International. The Communist International intends to organise an international section composed of the Red Unions, which accept the principles of Communism. The Communist International will not refuse to co-operate with purely non-political workers’ organisations desirous of carrying on a serious revolutionary struggle against the bourgeoisie. But, at the same time, the Communist International will never cease to emphasise to the workers of all the world:—

(1) The Communist International is the chief and essential instrument for the liberation of the working class. In each country there must now be not only Communist groups, or tendencies, but—a Communist Party.

(2) In every country there must be only one Communist Party.

(3) The Communist Party must be founded on the principle of the strictest centralisation, and *** it must introduce military discipline in its ranks.

(4) Wherever there are a dozen proletarians or semi-proletarians, the Communist Party must have an organised group.

(5) In each non-political organisation there must be a Communist group, strictly subordinate to the party as a whole.

(6) While firmly and faithfully supporting the programme and revolutionary tactics of Communism, the Communist Party must always be closely united with the great working-class organisation, and avoid sectarianism as much as it avoids lack of principle.

WHEN AND UNDER WHAT CONDITIONS SOVIETS OF WORKERS' DEPUTIES SHOULD BE FORMED

1. The Soviets of Workers' Deputies appeared for the first time in Russia in 1905, at a time when the revolutionary movement of Russian workmen was at its height. Already in 1905 the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' Deputies was taking the first instinctive steps towards a seizure of power. And at that time the Petrograd Soviet was strong only in so far as it had a chance of acquiring political power. As soon as the imperial counterrevolution rallied its forces and the Labour movement slackened, the Soviet, after a short period of stagnation, ceased to exist.

2. When in 1916, at the beginning of a new, strong revolutionary wave, the idea began to awaken in Russia of the immediate organisation of Soviets of Workers' Deputies, the Bolshevik Party warned the workers against the immediate formation of Soviets, and pointed out that such a formation would be well-timed only at the moment when the revolution was already beginning, and when the time had come for a direct struggle for power.

3. At the beginning of the February revolution of 1917, when the Soviets of Workers' Deputies were transformed into Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, they drew into the sphere of their influence the widest circles of the masses, and at once acquired a tremendous authority, because the real force was on their side, in their hands. But when the Liberal bourgeoisie recovered from the suddenness of the first revolutionary blows, and when the social traitors, the Socialist Revolutionaries and the Mensheviks, helped the Russian bourgeoisie to take the power into its hands, the importance of the Soviets began to dwindle. Only after the July days and after the failure of Korniloff's counter-revolutionary campaign, when the masses began to move, and when the collapse of the counter-revolutionary bourgeois coalition Government was quite near, then the Soviets began to flourish again; and they soon acquired a prominent importance in the country.

4. The history of the German and the Austrian revolutions shows the same. When the popular masses revolted, when the revolutionary wave rose so high that it washed away the

strongholds of the monarchies of the Hohenzollerns and the Hapsburgs, in Germany and in Austria the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies were formed with gigantic rapidity. At first the real force was on their side, and the Soviets were well on the way to become the *de facto* power. But as soon as, owing to a whole series of historical conditions, the power began to pass to the bourgeoisie and the counter-revolutionary Social-Democrats, then the Soviets began to decline and lose all importance. During the days of the unsuccessful counter-revolutionary revolt of Kapp-Luttwitz in Germany, the Soviets again resumed their activity, but when the struggle ended again in the victory of the bourgeoisie and the social-traitors, the Soviets, which had just begun to revive, once more died away.

5. The above facts prove that for the formation of Soviets certain definite premises are necessary. To organise Soviets of Workers' Deputies, and transform them into Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, the following conditions are necessary: —

(a) A great revolutionary impulse among the widest circles of workmen and workwomen, the soldiers and the workers in general;

(b) An acute political and economic crisis attaining such a degree that the power begins to slip out of the hands of the Government;

(c) When in the ranks of considerable masses of the workmen, and first of all when in the ranks of the Communist Party, a serious decision *** has become ripe.

6. In the absence of these conditions, the Communists may and should systematically and insistently propagate the idea of Soviets, popularise it among the masses, demonstrate to the widest circles of the population that the Soviets are the only efficient form of Government during the transition to complete Communism. But to proceed to the direct organisation of Soviets in the absence of the above three conditions is impossible.

7. The attempt of the social traitors in Germany to introduce the Soviets into the general bourgeois-democratic constitutional system, is treason to the workers' cause and deception of the workmen. Real Soviets are possible only as a form of State organisation, replacing bourgeois democracy, *** by the

dictatorship of the proletariat.

8. The propaganda of the Right leaders of the Independents (Hilferding, Kautsky, and others), intended to prove the compatibility of the "Soviet system" with the bourgeois Constituent Assembly, is either a complete misunderstanding of the laws of development of a proletarian revolution, or a conscious deceiving of the working class. The Soviets are the dictatorship of the proletariat. The Constituent Assembly is the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. To unite and reconcile the dictatorship of the working class with that of the bourgeoisie is impossible.

9. The propaganda of some representatives of the Left Independents in Germany presenting the workers with a ready-made, formal plan of a "Soviet system" having no relation whatever to the concrete process ***, is a doctrinaire pastime which draws the workers away from their essential tasks in the real struggle for power.

10. The attempts of separate Communist groups in France, Italy, America and England to form Soviets not embracing the larger working masses, and unable, therefore, to enter into *** are only prejudicial to the actual preparation of a Soviet revolution. Such artificial hot-house "Soviets" soon become transformed, at best, into small associations for propaganda of the Soviet idea, and in the worst case such miserable "Soviets" are capable only of compromising the Soviet idea in the eyes of the popular masses.

11. At the present time there exists a special condition in Austria, where the working class has succeeded in preserving its Soviets which unite large masses of workers. Here the situation resembles the period between February and October, 1917, in Russia. The Soviets in Austria represent a considerable political force and appear to be the embryo of a new power.

It must be understood that in such a situation the Communists ought to participate in these Soviets, help them to penetrate into all phases of the social-economic and political life of the country; they should create Communist factions within these Soviets, and by all means aid their development.

12. Soviets without *** inevitably become a parody of Soviets. The authentic Soviets of the masses are the historically elaborated forms of the dictatorship of the proletariat. All, sin-

care and serious partisans of Soviet power should deal cautiously with the idea of Soviets, and while indefatigably propagating it among the masses, should proceed to the direct realisation of such Soviets only under the conditions mentioned above.