

The Lesson of Spain by Leon Trotsky

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Seventy five years ago the Spanish revolution began as the working class and Republican forces fought to defend Spain from General Franco and his fascists army. Leon Trotsky wrote this article in July 1936, published in the US Socialist Magazine Socialist Appeal, where he outlines a way forward for the revolution and warns of the dangers of counter-revolutionary Stalinism.

The Officers? Corps?The Role of the Peopled Front?The Workers? Revolution

EUROPE has become a harsh and terrible school for the proletariat. In one country after another events have unfolded, which exacting great and bloody sacrifices from the workers, have up to the present moment ended in victory for the enemies of the proletariat (Italy, Germany, Austria). The policy of the old labor parties clearly shows how impossible it is for them to lead the proletariat, how incapable they are of preparing for victory.

At the present time, while this is being written, the civil war in Spain has not yet terminated. The workers of the entire world feverishly await the news of the victory of the Spanish proletariat. If this victory, as we firmly hope, is won it will be necessary to say: the workers have triumphed this time in spite of the fact that their leadership did everything to bring about their defeat. All the greater honor and glory to the Spanish working class!

In Spain the Socialists and Communists belong to the People's Front which already betrayed the revolution once, but which, thanks to the workers and peasants, once again attained victory and in February created a 'Republican' government. Six months afterwards the 'Republican' army took the field against the people. Thus it became clear that the People's Front government had maintained the military caste with the people's money, furnished them with authority, power and arms, gave them command over young workers and peasants, thereby facilitating the preparations for a crushing attack on the workers and peasants.

People's Front Curbs Social Revolution

More than that: even now, in the midst of civil war, the People's, Front government does everything in its power to make victory doubly difficult. A civil war is waged, as everybody knows, not only with military but also with political weapons. From a purely military point of view, the Spanish revolution is much weaker than its enemy. Its strength lies in its ability to rouse the great masses to action. It can even take the army away from its reactionary officers. To accomplish this it is only necessary seriously and courageously to advance the program of the socialist revolution.

It is necessary to proclaim that, from now on, the land, the factories and shops will pass from the capitalists into the hands of the people. It is necessary to move at once toward the realization of this program in those provinces where the workers are in power. The Fascist army could not resist the influence of such a

program for twenty-four hours; the soldiers would tie their officers hand and foot and hand them over to the nearest headquarters of the workers' militia. But the bourgeois ministers cannot accept such a program. Curbing the social revolution, they compel the workers and peasants to spill ten times as much of their own blood in the civil war. And to crown everything, these gentlemen expect to disarm the workers again after the victory and to force them to respect the sacred laws of private property. Such is the true essence of the policy of the People's Front. Everything else is pure humbug, phrases and lies!

Many supporters of the People's Front now shake their heads reproachfully at the rulers of Madrid! Why didn't they foresee all this? Why didn't they purge the army in time? Why didn't they take the necessary measures? More than anywhere else, these criticisms are being voiced in France, where, however, the policy of the leaders of the People's Front is in no way to be distinguished from the policy of their Spanish colleagues. In spite of the harsh lesson of Spain, one can say in advance that the Leon Blum government will accomplish no serious purge of the army. Why? Because the workers' organizations remain in a coalition with the Radicals and consequently are the prisoners of the bourgeoisie.

People's Militia Must Replace Officers' Corps

It is naive to complain that the Spanish republicans or the socialists or the communists foresaw nothing, let something slip. It is not at all a question of the perspicacity of this or that minister or leader, but of the general direction of the policy. The workers' party which enters into a political alliance with the radical bourgeoisie, by that fact alone renounces the struggle against capitalist militarism. Bourgeois domination, that is to say, the maintenance of private property of the means of production, is inconceivable without the support of the exploiters by the armed forces. The officers' corps represents the guard of capital. Without this guard the bourgeoisie could not maintain itself for a single day. The selection of the individuals, their education and training make the officers as a distinctive group uncompromising enemies of socialism. Isolated exceptions change nothing. That is how things stand in all bourgeois countries. The danger lies not in the military braggarts and demagogues who openly appear as fascist; incomparably more menacing is the fact that at the approach of the proletarian revolution the officers' corps becomes the executioner of the proletariat. To eliminate four or five hundred reactionary agitators from the army means to leave everything basically as it was before. The officers' corps in which is concentrated the centuries-old tradition of enslaving the people must be dissolved, broken, crushed in its entirety, root and branch. It is necessary to replace the troops in the barracks commanded by the officers' caste with the people's militia, that is, with the democratic organization of the armed workers and peasants. There is no other solution. But such an army is incompatible with the domination of exploiters big and small. Can the republicans agree to such a measure? Not at all. The People's Front government, that is to say, the government of the coalition of the workers with the bourgeoisie, is in its very essence a government of capitulation to the bureaucracy and the officers. Such is the great lesson of the events in Spain, now being paid for with thousands of human lives.

Defense of Republic is Defense of Capitalism

The political alliance of the working class leaders with the bourgeoisie is disguised as the defense of the 'republic.' The experience of Spain shows what this defense is in actuality. The word 'republican,' like the word 'democrat,' is a deliberate charlatanism which serves to cover up class contradictions. The bourgeois is a republican so long as the Republic protects private property. And the workers utilize the Republic to overthrow private property. In other words: the Republic loses all its value to the bourgeois the moment it assumes value for the workers. The radical cannot enter into a bloc with workers' parties without the assurance of support in the officers' corps. It is no accident that Daladier is at the head of the Ministry of War in France. The French bourgeoisie has entrusted this post to him more than once and he

has never betrayed them. Only people of the type of Maurice Paz or Marceau Pivert can believe that Daladier is capable of purging the army of reactionaries and Fascists, in other words, of dissolving the officers' corps. But no one takes such people seriously.

But here we are interrupted by the exclamation. "How can one dissolve the officers' corps? Doesn't this mean destroying the army and leaving the country disarmed in the face of Fascism? Hitler and Mussolini are only waiting for that!" All these arguments are old and familiar. That's how the Cadets, the S-Rs and the Russian Mensheviks reasoned in 1917, and that's how the leaders of the Spanish People's Front reasoned. The Spanish workers half-believed these ratiocinations until they were convinced by experience that the nearest Fascist enemy was to be found in the Spanish Fascist army. Not for nothing did our old friend Karl Liebknecht teach: "The main enemy is in our own country!"

Purging Army of Fascists An Illusion

L'Humanite tearfully begs that the army be purged of Fascists. But what is this plea worth? When you vote credits for the maintenance of the officers' corps, when you enter into an alliance with Daladier and through him with finance capital, confide the army to Daladier and at the same time demand that this entirely capitalist army serve the "people" and not capital then you have either become a complete idiot or else you are consciously deceiving the working masses.

"But we've got to have an army," repeat the socialist and communist leaders, "because we must defend our democracy and with it the Soviet Union against Hitler!" After the lesson of Spain it is not difficult to foresee the consequences of this policy for democracy as well as for the Soviet Union. Once they have found a favorable moment, the officers' corps, hand in hand with the dissolved Fascist leagues, will assume the offensive against the working masses, and, if victorious, will crush the miserable remnants of bourgeois democracy and extend their hands to Hitler for a common struggle against the U.S.S.R.

The articles appearing in Populaire and L'Humanite on the events in Spain fill one with rage and disgust. These people learn nothing. They do not want to learn. They consciously shut their eyes to the facts. The principal lesson for them is that it is necessary at all costs to maintain the "unity" of the People's Front, that is to say, unity with the bourgeoisie and friendship with Daladier.

Daladier and the Generals

Unquestionably Daladier is a great "democrat." But can one doubt for a moment that side by side with the official work in Blum's ministry, he is working unofficially in the general staff of the officers' corps? There one finds serious people who look facts in the face, who do not get drunk on hollow rhetoric the way Blum does. These people are prepared for every eventuality. No doubt Daladier and the military leaders are coming to an understanding with respect to the necessary measures to take in case the workers take the road toward revolution. To be sure the generals are of their own accord far ahead of Daladier. And among themselves the generals say: "Let's support Daladier until we are through with the workers and then we will put a stronger man in his place." At the same time the socialist and communist leaders repeat from day to day: "Our friend Daladier." The worker ought to reply to them: "Tell me who your friends are and I will tell you who you are." People who entrust the army to that old agent of capital, Daladier, are unworthy of the workers' confidence.

Certainly, the Spanish proletariat like the French proletariat, does not want to remain disarmed before Mussolini and Hitler. But to defend themselves against these enemies it is first necessary to crush the enemy in one's own country. It is impossible to overthrow the bourgeoisie without crushing the officers' corps. It is impossible to crush the officers' corp without overthrowing the bourgeoisie. In every victorious

counter-revolution, the officers have played the decisive role. Every victorious revolution, that had a profound social character destroyed the old officers' corps. This was the case in the Great French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century, and this was the case in the October Revolution in 1917. To decide on such a measure one must stop crawling on one's knees before the Radical bourgeoisie. A genuine alliance of workers and peasants must be created against the bourgeoisie, including the Radicals. One must have confidence in the strength, initiative and courage of the proletariat and the proletariat will know how to bring the soldier over to its side. This will be a genuine and not a fake alliance of workers, peasants and soldiers. This very alliance is being created and tempered right now in the fire of civil war in Spain. The victory of the people means the end of the People's Front and the beginning of Soviet Spain. The victorious social revolution in Spain will inevitably spread out over the rest of Europe. For the Fascist hangmen of Italy and Germany it will be incomparably more terrible than all the diplomatic pacts and all the military alliances.

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