

Theses on the Communist Parties and Parliamentarism

Third (Communist) International, Second Congress

Petrograd/Moscow, July–August, 1920

1 — The New Epoch and the New Parliamentarism

The attitude of the socialist parties towards parliamentarism was in the beginning, in the period of the First International, that of using bourgeois parliaments for the purpose of agitation. Participation in parliament was considered from the point of view of the development of class consciousness, i.e. of awakening the class hostility of the proletariat to the ruling class. This relationship was transformed, not through the influence of theory, but through the influence of political development. Through the uninterrupted increase of the productive forces and the extension of the area of capitalist exploitation, capitalism, and with it the parliamentary state, gained continually increasing stability.

Hence there arose: The adaptation of the parliamentary tactics of the socialist parties to the "organic" legislative work of the bourgeois parliament and the ever-greater importance of the struggle for reforms in the framework of capitalism, the domination of the so-called minimum programme of social democracy, the transformation of the maximum programme into a debating formula for an exceedingly distant "final goal". On this basis then developed the phenomena of parliamentary careerism, of corruption, and of the open or concealed betrayal of the most elementary interests of the working class.

The attitude of the Communist International towards parliamentarism is determined, not by a new doctrine, but by the change in the role of par-

liament itself. In the previous epoch parliament performed, to a certain degree, a historically progressive task as a tool of developing capitalism. Under the present conditions of unbridled imperialism, however, parliament has been transformed into a tool for lies, deception, violence, and enervating chatter. In the face of imperialist devastation, plundering, rape, banditry, and destruction, parliamentary reforms, robbed of any system, permanence, and method, lose any practical significance for the toiling masses.

Like the whole of bourgeois society, parliamentarism too is losing its stability. The sudden transition from the organic epoch to the critical creates the basis for a new tactic of the proletariat in the field of parliamentarism. Thus the Russian [Social Democratic] Labour Party (the Bolsheviki) had already worked out the nature of revolutionary parliamentarism in the previous period, because since 1905 Russia had been shaken from its political and social equilibrium and had entered the period of storms and shocks.

To the extent that some socialists, who tend towards communism, point out that the moment for the revolution has not yet come in their countries, and refuse to split from parliamentary opportunists, they proceed, in the essence of the matter, from the conscious assessment of the coming epoch as an epoch of the relative stability of imperialist society, and assume that on this basis a coalition with the Turatis and the Longuets [these two names refer to reformist/opportunist leaders in the Italian and French Socialist Parties, respec-

tively—Ed.] can bring practical results in the struggle for reforms. Theoretically clear communism, on the other hand, will correctly estimate the character of the present epoch: highest stage of capitalism; imperialist self-negation and self-destruction; uninterrupted growth of civil war, etc. The forms of political relations and groupings can be different in different countries. The essence however remains everywhere one and the same; what is at stake for us is the immediate political and technical preparations for the insurrection of the proletariat, the destruction of bourgeois power, and the establishment of the new proletarian power.

At present, parliament, for communists, can in no way become the arena for the struggle for reforms, for the amelioration of the position of the working class, as was the case at certain times in the previous period. The center of gravity of political life has, at present, been removed finally and completely beyond the bounds of parliament. On the other hand the bourgeoisie is forced, not only by reason of its relations to the toiling masses, but also by reason of the complex mutual relations within the bourgeois class, to carry out part of its measures one way or another in parliament, where the various cliques haggle for power, reveal their strong sides, betray their weak sides expose themselves, etc.

Therefore it is the historical task of the working class to wrest this apparatus from the hands of the ruling class, to smash it, to destroy it, and replace it with new proletarian organs of power. At the same time, however, the revolutionary general staff of the class has a strong interest in having its scouts in the parliamentary institutions of the bourgeoisie in order to make this task of destruction easier. Thus is demonstrated quite clearly the basic difference between the tactic of the communist, who enters parliament with revolutionary aims, and the tactics of the socialist parlia-

mentarian. The latter proceeds from the assumption of the relative stability and the indeterminate duration of the existing rule. He makes it his task to achieve reform by every means, and he is interested in seeing to it that every achievement is suitably assessed by the masses as a merit of parliamentary socialism. (Turati, Longuet and Co.).

In the place of the old adaptation to parliamentarism, the new parliamentarism emerges as a tool for the annihilation of parliamentarism in general. The disgusting traditions of the old parliamentary tactics have, however, repelled a few revolutionary elements into the camp of the opponents of parliamentarism on principle (the IWW, revolutionary syndicalists, and the KAPD). The Second Congress therefore adopts the following theses.

2 — Communism, the Struggle for the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, and the Utilization of Bourgeois Parliaments

I

1. — Parliamentarism as a state system has become a "democratic" form of the rule of the bourgeoisie, which at a certain stage of development requires the fiction of popular representation which outwardly appears to be an organization of a "popular will" that stands outside the classes, but in essence is a machine for oppression and subjugation in the hands of ruling capital.

2. — Parliament is a definite form of state order; therefore it cannot at all be the form of communist society, which knows neither classes nor class struggle nor any state power.

3. — Nor can parliamentarism be a form of proletarian state administration in the period of transition from the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie to the dictatorship of the proletariat. In the moment of sharpened class struggle, in the civil war, the proletariat must inevitably build up

its state organization as a *fighting organization*, into which the representatives of the previous ruling classes are not permitted. In this stage, any fiction of the "popular will" is directly harmful to the working class. The proletariat does not need any parliamentary sharing of power, it is harmful to it. The form of the proletarian dictatorship is the soviet republic.

4. — The bourgeois parliaments, one of the most important apparatuses of the bourgeois state machine, cannot as such in the long run be taken over, just as the proletariat cannot at all take over the proletarian state. The task of the proletariat consists in breaking up the bourgeois state machine, destroying it, and with it the parliamentary institutions, be they republican or a constitutional monarchy.

5. — It is no different with the local government institutions of the bourgeoisie, and it is theoretically incorrect to counterpose to the state organs. In reality they are similar apparatuses of the state machine of the bourgeoisie, which must be destroyed by the revolutionary proletariat and replaced by local soviets of workers' deputies.

6. — Consequently, communism denies parliamentarism as a form of the society of the future. It denies it as a form of the class dictatorship of the proletariat. It denies the possibility of taking over parliament in the long run; it sets itself the aim of destroying parliamentarism. Therefore there can only be a question of utilizing the bourgeois state institutions for the purpose of their destruction. The question can be posed in this, and only in this, way.

II

7. — Every class struggle is a political struggle, for in the final analysis it is a struggle for power. Any strike that spreads over the whole country becomes a threat to the bourgeois state, and thus takes on a political character. Every attempt to

overthrow the bourgeoisie and to destroy its state means carrying out a political fight. Creating a proletarian state apparatus for administration and for the oppression of the resisting bourgeoisie, of whatever type that apparatus will be, means conquering political power.

8. — Consequently the question of political power is not at all identical with the question of the attitude towards parliamentarism. The former is a general question of the proletarian class struggle, which is characterized by the intensification of small and partial struggles to the general struggle for the overthrow of the capitalist order as a whole.

9. — The most important method of struggle of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie, i.e. against its state power, is above all mass action. Mass actions are organized and led by the revolutionary mass organizations (trades unions, parties, soviets) of the proletariat under the general leadership of a unified, disciplined, centralized communist party. Civil war is war. In this war the proletariat must have its bold officer corps and its strong general staff, who direct all operations in all theaters of the struggle.

10. — The mass struggle is a whole system of developing actions sharpening in their form and logically leading to the insurrection against the capitalist state. In this mass struggle, which develops into civil war, the leading party of the proletariat must as a rule consolidate all its legal positions by making them into auxiliary bases of its revolutionary activity, and subordinate these positions to the plan of the main campaign, the campaign of the mass struggle.

11. — The rostrum [a stage for public speaking—Editor's note] of the bourgeois parliament is such an auxiliary base. The argument that parliament is a bourgeois state institution cannot at all be used against participation in the parliamentary struggle. The communist party does not enter

these institutions in order to carry out organic work there, but in order to help the masses from inside parliament to break up the state machine and parliament itself through action (for example the activity of Liebknecht in Germany, of the Bolsheviks in the Tsarist Duma, in the "Democratic Conference", in Kerensky's "Pre-Parliament", in the "Constituent Assembly" and in the town Dumas, and finally the activity of the Bulgarian Communists).

12 — This activity in parliament, which consists mainly in revolutionary agitation from the parliamentary rostrum, in unmasking opponents, in the ideological unification of the masses who still, particularly in backward areas, are captivated by democratic ideas, look towards the parliamentary rostrum, etc. should be totally and completely subordinated to the aims and tasks of the mass struggle outside parliament.

Participation in election campaigns and revolutionary propaganda from the parliamentary rostrum is of particular importance for winning over those layers of the workers who previously, like, say, the rural toiling masses, stood far away from political life.

13. — Should the communists have the majority in local government institutions, they should:

- a) carry out revolutionary opposition to the bourgeois central power;
- b) do everything to be of service to the poorer population (economic measures, introduction or attempted introduction of an armed workers' militia, etc.);
- c) at every opportunity show the limitations placed on really big changes by the bourgeois state power;
- d) on this basis develop the sharpest revolutionary propaganda without fearing the conflict with the power of the state;

e) under certain circumstances replace the local administration by local workers' councils. The whole activity of the communists in the local administration must therefore be part of the general work of disrupting the capitalist system.

14. — Election campaigns should not be carried out in the spirit of the hunt for the maximum number of parliamentary seats, but in the spirit of the revolutionary mobilization of the masses for the slogans of the proletarian revolution. Election campaigns should be carried out by the whole mass of the party members and not only by an elite of the party. It is necessary to utilize all mass actions (strikes, demonstrations, ferment among the soldiers and sailors, etc.) that are taking place at the time, and to come into close touch with them. It is necessary to draw all the proletarian mass organizations into active work.

15. — In observing all these conditions, as well as those in a special instruction, parliamentary activity is the direct opposite of that petty politicking done by the social-democratic parties of every country, who go into parliament in order to support this "democratic" institution, or at best to "take it over". The communist party can only be exclusively in favor of the revolutionary utilization of parliament in the spirit of Karl Liebknecht and of the Bolsheviks.

III

16. — "Anti-parliamentarism" on principle, in the sense of absolute and categorical rejection of participation in elections and revolutionary parliamentary activity, is therefore a naïve, childish doctrine below any criticism, a doctrine which occasionally has a basis in healthy nausea at politicking parliamentarians, but which does not see at the same time the possibility of a revolutionary parliamentarism. Moreover, this doctrine is often linked with a completely incorrect conception of

the role of the party, which sees in the communist party not the centralized shock troops of the workers, but a decentralized system of loosely allied groups.

17. — On the other hand, an absolute recognition of the necessity of actual elections and of actual participation in parliamentary sessions *under all circumstances* by no means flows from the recognition in principle of parliamentary activity. That is dependent upon a whole series of specific conditions. Withdrawal from parliament can be necessary given a specific combination of these conditions. This is what the Bolsheviks did when they withdrew from the pre-parliament in order to break it up, to rob it of any strength, and boldly to counterpose to it the St. Petersburg Soviet on the eve of the insurrection. They did the same in the Constituent Assembly on the day of its dissolution, raising the Third Congress of Soviets to the high point of political events. According to circumstances, a boycott of the elections and the immediate violent removal of not only the whole bourgeois state apparatus, but also the bourgeois parliamentary clique, or on the other hand participation in the elections while parliament itself is boycotted, etc. can be necessary.

18. — In this way the communist party, which recognizes the necessity of participating in the elections not only to the central parliament, but also to the organs of local self-government and work in these institutions as a general rule, must resolve this problem concretely, starting from the specific peculiarities of any given moment. A boycott of elections or of parliament and withdrawal from the latter is mainly permissible when the preconditions for the immediate transition to the armed struggle and the seizure of power are already present.

19. — In the process, one should always bear in mind the relative unimportance of this question. Since the center of gravity lies in the struggle for

state power carried out outside parliament, it goes without saying that the question of the proletarian dictatorship and the mass struggle for it cannot be placed on the same level as the particular question of the utilization of parliament.

20. — The Communist International therefore emphasizes decisively that it holds every split or attempted split within the communist parties in this direction and only for this reason to be a serious error. The congress calls on all elements who base themselves on the recognition of the mass struggle for the proletarian dictatorship under the leadership of the centralized party of the revolutionary proletariat exerting its influence on all the mass organizations of the workers, to strive for the complete unity of the communist elements despite possible differences of opinion over the question of the utilization of bourgeois parliaments.

3 — Revolutionary Parliamentarism

In order to secure the actual carrying out of revolutionary parliamentary tactics it is necessary that:

1. — The communist party as a whole and its central committee, already in the *preparatory stage*, that is to say before the parliamentary election, must take care of the high quality of the personal composition of the parliamentary faction. The central committee of the communist party must be responsible for the whole work of the parliamentary faction. The central committee of the communist party must have the undeniable right to raise objections to any candidate or any organization, if there is no guarantee that if the candidate gets into parliament, he will pursue really communist policies.

The communist party must break the old social-democratic habit of putting up exclusively so-called "experienced" parliamentarians, predominantly lawyers and similar people, as members of

parliament. As a rule it is necessary to put up workers as candidates, without baulking at the fact that these are mainly simple party members without any great parliamentary experience. The communist party must ruthlessly stigmatize those careerist elements that come around the communist parties in order to get into parliament. The central committees of the communist parties must only ratify the candidatures of those comrades who have shown their unconditional devotion to the working class by long years of work.

2. — When the elections are over, the organization of the parliamentary faction must be completely in the hands of the central committee of the communist parties, irrespective of whether the whole party is legal or illegal at the time in question. The chairman and the committee of the communist parliamentary faction must be ratified by the central committee of the party. The central committee of the party must have a permanent representative in the parliamentary faction with a right of veto, and on all important political questions the parliamentary faction shall ask the central committee of the party in advance for instructions concerning its behavior. Before any big forthcoming action by the communists in parliament, the central committee has the right and the duty to appoint or to reject the speaker for the faction, and to demand of him that he previously submit the main points of his speech or the speech itself for approval by the central committee. A written undertaking must be officially obtained from every candidate on the proposed communist list that, as soon as he is called upon to do so by the party, he is prepared to resign his seat, so that in a given situation the action of withdrawing from parliament can be carried out in a united way.

3. — In those countries where reformist, semi-reformist, or merely careerist elements have managed to penetrate into the communist parliamen-

tary faction, (as has already happened in some countries) the central committees of the communist parties have the obligation of carrying out a thorough purge of the personal composition of the faction, proceeding on the principle that it is much more useful for the cause of the working class to have a small, but truly communist faction, than a large faction without consistent communist policies.

4. — On the decision of the central committee, the communist member of parliament has the obligation to combine legal with illegal work. In those countries where the communist members of parliament enjoy immunity from bourgeois law, this immunity must be utilized to support the party in its illegal work of organization and propaganda.

5. — Communist members of parliament must subordinate all parliamentary action to the activity of their party outside parliament. The regular introduction of demonstrative draft laws, which are not intended to be accepted by the bourgeois majority, but for the purposes of propaganda, agitation, and organization, must take place on the instructions of the party and its central committee.

6. — In the event of demonstrations by workers in the streets and other revolutionary actions, the communist members of parliament have the duty to place themselves in the most conspicuous leading place at the head of the masses of workers.

7. — Communist members of parliament must use every means at their disposal (under the supervision of the party) to create written and any other kind of links with the revolutionary workers, peasants, and other toilers. Under no circumstances can they act like social-democratic members of parliament, who pursue business connections with their voters. They must be constantly at the disposal of the party for any propaganda work in the country.

8. — Every communist member of parliament must bear in mind that he is not a legislator seeking an understanding with other legislators, but a party agitator who has been sent into the enemy camp in order to carry out party decisions there. The communist member of parliament is responsible, not to the scattered mass of voters, but to his party, be it legal or illegal.

9. — Communist members of parliament must speak a language that can be understood by every simple worker, every peasant, every washerwoman, and every shepherd, so that the party is able to publish the speeches as leaflets and distribute them to the most distant corners of the country.

10. — Simple communist workers must appear in the bourgeois parliament without leaving precedence to so-called experienced parliamentarians—even in cases where the workers are only newcomers to the parliamentary arena. If need be, the members of parliament from the ranks of the working class can read their speeches from notes, so that the speeches can be printed in the press and as leaflets.

11. — Communist members of parliament must use the parliamentary rostrum for the unmasking not only of the bourgeoisie and its hacks, but also of the social-patriots, and the reformists, of the vacillations of the politicians of the "center", and of other opponents of communism, and for broad propaganda for the ideas of the Communist International.

12. — Even in cases where there are only a few of them in the whole parliament, communist members of parliament have to show a challenging attitude towards capitalism in their whole behavior. They must never forget that only he is worthy of the name of a communist who is an arch enemy of bourgeois society and its social-democratic hacks not only in words but also in deeds.



Text proofread and edited by Equals Publishing Online at equalspublishing.org.
No rights reserved.

Texts sourced from Marxist Internet Archive
<https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/2nd-congress/ch08a.htm#v2-p49>

Translated by Bob Archer; Transcribed by Andy Blunden.