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Marxism and Democracy

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The triumph of Byzantinism in language has always been a sure sign of decadence. It is difficult to conceive of a more Byzantine language than the political language of our time, thanks to which the straw men of the Yankee Sixty Families become the "champions of the human personality" and the GPU squadron leaders the "guardians of the most democratic constitution in the world." The most abused term of our time is undoubtedly the term "*democracy*." Passionate controversies have raged about its definition, international conflicts are identified with the various interpretations of its meaning. This meaning however fits into a well defined framework if it is removed from all polemical surroundings and considered in the light of its historic evolution and its social content.

"Democracy" literally means "government (power) by the people." Usually the word is employed to designate the parliamentary regimes which developed in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century on the British model. These regimes not only were not governments by the *entire people* – electoral qualifications generally excluded nine-tenths of the inhabitants from all exercise of political rights – but not even direct governments of the owning classes. They were representative and *indirect* parliamentary governments. Their mode of operation was perfectly characterized by Marx when he said that once every four years, they permitted the mass of electors to designate the members of the ruling class who were to govern the country.

However, the historic origin of the parliamentary "democracy" of the nineteenth century is in fact to be found in a *direct democracy*: the petty-bourgeois democracy of the medieval communes. We know that this democracy disintegrated following the rise of capitalist trade and monarchical absolutism. Under specific conditions (certain Swiss cantons and Scandinavian agricultural communities ; pioneer regions in the Middle West of the US in the nineteenth century, etc.), this advanced form of democracy was able to subsist and to temporarily reproduce itself up to the middle of the nineteenth century.

These narrow limits were determined by the existence of a *genuine social and economic equality*, itself the function of specific historic conditions. These communities of small agricultural proprietors were rapidly swallowed up by the world rise of capitalism and their social equality was not long in disappearing into an extreme polarization of social conditions. This is what condemns in advance all the petty-bourgeois Utopias of "social democracy" just as the famous plan of Saint-Just for the redistribution of the land remained unrealizable.

The opposition between the principle of direct democracy and representative "democracy" is in no sense an artificial mental construction. During all the bourgeois revolutions, this is what crystallized the nascent ideological conflict between the triumphant bourgeoisie and the plebeian formations, the principal actors of the revolutionary drama. In his scholarly work, **The Class Struggle Under the First Republic**, Daniel Guerin points out that "the men in shirt-sleeves of Paris" spontaneously raised the question of the direct exercise of power by the people in opposition to all the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois groupings, including the Jacobins, the most radical and fanatical supporters of the principles of representative government.

This opposition not only expressed the fear of the bourgeoisie of direct government by the people which would inevitably turn against all forms of exploitation ; whereas representative "democracy" is so organized as to protect capitalist exploitation. This opposition also corresponds to the specific function which ascending capitalism assigns to the state.

The bourgeoisie was violently hostile to any intervention of the public power into economic life. It demanded "total freedom of action" for every citizen. In practice, this freedom signified *freedom of competition* between the individual

bourgeois, proprietors of the means of production, and unlimited *freedom of exploitation* of individual proletarians by the capitalists as a whole. The sole means of defense at the disposal of the workers was precisely their organized resistance, prohibited by law. The function of the state, acting as the arbiter between *the different factions of the owning class*, was thus limited to the supervision of this "free" play of social forces.

Parliament was actually the most suitable form of government for the execution of these functions. Additional guarantees were assured by the so-called "*independence of the three constitutional powers*." The executive power and the judiciary power, tightly held by "the upper layers of the bourgeoisie, constituted the additional ramparts surrounding sacrosanct bourgeois property, if by any chance parliament should slip out of the complete control of the capitalists for a brief period.

Imperialist "Democracy"

Toward the last quarter of the nineteenth century, this condition of classic equilibrium of bourgeois society began to be shaken by two opposite but parallel phenomena : the prodigious growth of the organized labor movement on the one side and the growth of capitalist groupings (cartels, trusts, monopolies) on the other. An inexorable process of *centralisation* transformed bourgeois society from a resultant of conflicts between millions of individuals into an area where giant all-powerful organizations confronted each other. The maintenance of the capitalist regime was no longer assured by the "free play of social forces" but depended more and more on the direct use of state coercion.

The organization of the working class, the inevitable product of capitalism itself as was predicted by the **Communist Manifesto** several decades before it became a living reality, introduced a permanent twofold pressure into the bourgeois state. On the one side, the workers' organizations fought for an improvement of the living and working conditions of the proletariat by means of *social legislation* promulgated by the state. On the other side, they struggled for *universal suffrage*, which tended to transfer the struggle between the representatives of the bourgeoisie and those of the proletariat into parliament.

On both levels, the struggle was often carried on by violent methods (general strikes in Russia, Italy, Poland, Austria, Belgium, etc.). Furthermore, this was precisely the period of the feverish rise of imperialism. By conquering the entire planet, the big bourgeoisie of the Western European nations were able to yield important concessions to their own proletariat. The new equilibrium of imperialist "democracy" which thus resulted, and which still brings sighs of longing from all the good reformists, was however paid for by the sufferings and the ruthless exploitation of four-fifths of mankind : the colonial and semi-colonial peoples.

This new equilibrium was expressed in the transformation of the function of the parliamentary bourgeois state and in the appearance of the centralized state machine as the *essential* weapon for the defense of the monopolists. Parliament and analogous organisms in the different echelons of national life became instruments of *class conciliation*. In exchange for the reforms which the workers' representatives received in parliament, they kept the class struggle outside of parliament, within a strictly legal framework, that is, within the framework of tacit acceptance of capitalist profits and colonial super-profits. But "political equality" never lost its *formal* character in the framework of this imperialist "democracy" because the vast concentration of wealth in the hands of the monopolists permitted them to enjoy an equivalent political power inside and outside parliament.

As a consequence of its structure, the bourgeois state in its upper echelons is entirely dominated by the ablest representatives of the big bourgeoisie, a product of a veritable *secular selection* (office-holders of the British Foreign Office, Colonial Office and War Office ; French financial inspectors, etc.). In the beginning, the bourgeois state

machine was only a simple executive organ responsive to the orders of the real bourgeois government, which coincided in this period with the official bourgeois government. The capitalists in this epoch wanted to limit this machine to the utmost to prevent the squandering of money. In fact toward the end of the nineteenth century, the United States was brought close to default.

But to the extent that parliament ceased to represent exclusively the interests of the bourgeoisie, the bourgeoisie ceased to consider parliament as its essential weapon. The *state machine* (office-holders and irremovable judges, the army, the clergy, the propaganda apparatus, etc.), endowed with the last word in technical progress, is perfected and becomes the *real center* of political power, the parliament is reduced to its shadow. Corresponding to the concentration of wealth in the hands of the monopolists is the concentration of real political power in its own hands exercised by the bourgeois state machine which they "hold" through family, financial and ideological ties.

The Totalitarianization of the Bourgeois State

In the period of its highest prosperity (1878-1918), imperialist "democracy" thus appears as the product of the action of the labor movement plus the formation of monopolies upon classical parliamentarism. But this period of supreme prosperity does not last long. Soon imperialism is shaken by convulsions which grow out of its own laws of development (wars, organic crises) and the social contradictions which it builds up (revolutions, civil wars, colonial uprisings). The old framework of the "democratic" equilibrium becomes rapidly obsolete.

Unable to concede new sops to the proletariat, forced to progressively withdraw the old concessions, the bourgeoisie more and more looks upon "parliamentary legality" as an intolerable and superfluous luxury. They turn against the regime to the degree that the workers' representatives on their side can no longer adhere to "their" commitments in the tacit pact. Despite the presence of important workers' fractions in parliament, the extra-parliamentary class struggle assumes a more and more violent form. Finally, the organic crisis of capitalism attains such proportions that the least freedom afforded to the proletarian class struggle becomes a mortal threat to the domination of the bourgeois class.

The state guarantee of capitalist profits becomes the principal function of the state. This requires the complete regimentation of the life of nations under the orders of the monopolists, the organization of a frenzied and permanent campaign to artificially and violently repress the contradictions which threaten to shatter to bits the entire capitalist edifice. This is the characteristic form of the state in our time : the totalitarian state within whose framework the police dictatorship (open, as under fascism, or thinly veiled, as it is now in Greece, typical of the regimes now being established in several Western European countries) corresponds to the extreme concentration of economic and state power and to the permanent crisis of the regime.

The totalitarianization of capitalism is neither a uniform nor a direct process. It comes into being first in those countries where "national" capitalism is subjected to a particularly acute crisis resulting from peculiar historical factors (Germany, Italy, Japan). It knows how to adapt itself to peculiar national conditions and to conform to the specific social features of a given country (reactionary movements of petty-bourgeois revolt in Germany and Italy ; elements of militarist traditionalism in Japan, etc.).

The extent of its realization depends in large part on the capacity of the workers to resist, and it is retarded by the existence of vast rational reserves (Great Britain, USA). But it penetrates in a thousand different forms in all countries and is expressed in a more and more rigid control over economic, social, political and cultural life by the state organisms ruled by the monopolists. This is the stage in which capitalism "negates" all the principles it held when it

came into the world, but "negates" them in a *retrograde* manner without supplanting them through a higher order of principles.

The supreme organisation of capitalism is the organization of a bloody chaos. This is the way the fundamental paradox of our epoch appears. Never before has there been such "organizing" – from the organization of infants to the manufacture of coffins – and never has society functioned in such a chaotic and convulsive way. Never before has all of life been submitted to so much regimentation and never has it appeared so unregulated, to such a point that it evades all human control. This paradox attains its ultimate expression in *war*, in whose framework all of humanity is rigidly regimented like an inanimate machine whose every piece functions in strictest order : but the machine in its entirety revolves in a void, sowing blind destruction around itself and completely evades the calculations of the most "genius-like" of its operators.

It is not difficult to disclose the profound causes of this lamentable situation. Economic centralization and prodigious technological progress have produced a genuine *socialisation of labor* ; the satisfaction of social needs requires a conscious coordination of all spheres of production. This coordination of hundreds of millions of men, of tens of billions of horsepower, of hundreds of thousands of productive centers and of thousands of different activities is only possible *from below*, by the consciously coordinated activity of the producers themselves. But capitalist "organization" tends toward the imposition *from above* of greater and greater restraint upon the producers, thus continually loosening their grip over production. In a word, the "organization" of the totalitarian states is an organization of *restraint of men* and not a *rational organisation of things*.

The more the bureaucracies of state and industry swell in size, the less the individual "bureaucrat" depends upon his own judgment in making decisions ; the more the entire machine is subordinated to the decisions of the handful of monopolists, the more the whole of regimented society slips out of all *effective* control. On the economic, political, social and cultural plane, the disequilibrium of the world is infinitely greater than in the time of "liberal" capitalism, when all regimentation was in disfavor. The more capitalist organization is perfected, the more it extends a .bloody chaos over the entire planet.

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"Progressive Democracy"

In this formula – "to replace the rational organization of things for the restraint of men" – we have the whole secret and the essential content of socialism in our epoch. We find therein at the same time a precise gauge for measuring the progress and the retrogressive involution of the Russian Revolution and the lamentable results Stalinist reaction has brought about in the countries of its "strategic buffer-zone" which are called "progressive democracies." After flirting with the whole retinue of imperialist "democracy" during the years of the "antifascist war," the Stalinists are forced today by the cold war to present a criticism of this "democracy."

Superficially, this criticism seems to follow the grand lines of the criticism which Lenin already formulated so magnificently in his **State and Revolution**. The Stalinists justly denounce the *formal* character of freedom of information in "Yankee democracy." The material means for the practical exercise of this freedom is kept as the prerogative of tiny groups of monopolists who rigidly control all the agencies and organs of information. No less formal is "freedom of the ballot," this most sacred rite of imperialist "democracy," which along with the monopoly of higher education and public information is in practice the preserve of the big bourgeoisie. In this manner the overwhelming majority of the voters are not permitted to gain an individual understanding of the events and the parties, while powerful political machines block the road to all new organizations, etc.

Political equality, is a farce so long as the most crying social inequality exists. Human relations are not determined by the ballot one is permitted to cast every four years but rather by the material means at one's disposal, and these relations are veritable *relations of servitude* in a society based on the exploitation of man by man.

But it is something else again when the Stalinists couple with this justified critique of imperialist "democracy," a eulogy to the so-called "economic democracy" which prevails in the Eastern European countries and which is *no less formal*. It is true that the constitutions of most of these countries solemnly proclaim that the principal natural resources as well as the vital sectors of industry belong to the nation – just as equality among citizens is no less solemnly proclaimed in the bourgeois "democratic" countries.

But in practice, nationalization in these countries does not in any way whatever place the means of production in the hands of the *producers*, the workers. The means of production remain at the disposal of the bureaucrats, the functionaries of the "party," the state and the economy whose rights in the factories are far greater than yesterday's bosses and against whom the worker has no means of defense if he does not wish to risk the accusation of "sabotage." Not only are the workers deprived of all practical means to exercise their rights under the police dictatorship, but a new social inequality develops which, although limited to the sphere of distribution, calls into being a whole machinery of laws, judges and gendarmes for protection against "intolerable equalitarian tendencies."

This becomes all the clearer when one considers that Stalinism deliberately avoided the creation of state organs within whose framework the masses could make their voice heard and impose their will. When the old state machinery was destroyed in Yugoslavia, Poland, and partially in Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria, the workers in these countries in numerous cases seized the factories and even the power itself.

The establishment of the regimes labeled "progressive democracies" thus consisted in a veritable *political expropriation of the proletariat*, through the reintroduction of the machinery of the *bourgeois* state (parliament, irremovable judiciary, standing army, corps of functionaries, etc.). This was intended not so much at "appeasing" Western imperialism (we can see it better today) as to keep the proletariat in a tight bureaucratic straitjacket. But in other countries (Hungary, Rumania, Finland and partially Bulgaria) they did not even touch the bourgeois state apparatus, which was taken over as a whole by the Stalinists who as a result preserved in its entirety the whole former arsenal of instruments of *massoppression*.

The economic expression of this state of things was not long in being revealed. Grandiose economic possibilities, opened by the nationalizations, were not at all utilized in a rational way. The countries of Eastern Europe were kept in their narrow national framework in which all planning becomes a joke. The successive "plans" which were drafted were intended to satisfy the needs of the Russian bureaucracy and did not in the slightest correspond to the needs of the masses of these countries. They brought the workers nothing besides more work and less effective means for self-defense.

The workers' reaction expressed itself in absenteeism, lowering of output, the development of the "parallel" market, barter, etc. The bureaucrats concluded from this that the "backward" workers were "sabotaging socialist construction," that it was therefore necessary to strengthen the means of coercion. Everywhere similar arguments are voiced by the Stalinists. Thus the path, is cleared for the reinforcement of the secret police, for the system of forced labor, for the effective suppression of all political freedom. Here also restraint upon men, as it becomes more and more rigid, renders the organization of things more and more chaotic.

The Victory of the Bureaucracy in the USSR

Two decades ago, similar methods led to the degeneration of the first Workers' State in Russia. From a victorious revolution which, during its heroic years, witnessed a striking affirmation of the creative initiative of the masses, of voluntary discipline and indomitable courage of millions of proletarians, it has become a regime where restraint atrophies human potentialities in all spheres of social life, where "the organization" has lost all contact with the needs and real aspirations of the masses. In this sense, the isolated Russian Revolution has led to a *totalitarianization* parallel to that brought about by the evolution of the capitalist states.

From this the enemies of the October Revolution, from the reformists to the anarchists, draw the conclusion that this involution is the "logical" result of Bolshevik organization "methods" and of the seizure of power. This argument has no more truth than the observation that cancer is a "logical" product of life, since malignant tumors never appear in inanimate matter. The Bolsheviks did not at all take power in October 1917 for the purpose of building a socialist society "isolated" from the rest of the world in a backward country with a poor and culturally undeveloped proletariat. In their minds, their victory was to aid the proletariat of the advanced countries of Europe to build socialism on the basis of the high technological and cultural level of Central and Western Europe.

Between 1918 and 1923 the opportunities to realize this aim were many. Social Democracy, which remained the predominant organization of the workers in the West, aborted the successive revolutionary uprisings in these countries. From this point on decadent capitalism in the West assumed more and more an abject totalitarian form, and the isolated Russian Revolution degenerated under the burden of the old Russian barbarism to produce the monster of Stalinism. In this sense we would be a thousand times justified in declaring that fascism and Stalinism are the legitimate offspring of the Social Democracy and the betrayals it perpetrated against the proletarian revolution during the decisive years 1918-23.

But we are not at all obliged to employ negative argumentation in defense of the October Revolution and the Bolshevik methods of taking power because of the Stalinist degeneration. The victorious proletarian revolution is the expression of a certain combination of material and moral forces favorable to the working class. The presence of a party, the conscious leadership of its class, humanly, organizationally and politically capable of assuring this revolutionary victory, is nothing but a specific form of expressing this same relationship of forces.

Then, the ebb of the international revolutionary movement and the exhaustion of the Russian proletariat modify this relationship of forces at the expense of the vanguard of the class. The triumph of Stalinism was the political expression of this modification. But this triumph could only be realized by the physical annihilation of the Bolshevik Party and by the police massacre of the whole generation which had led October to victory. Doesn't that prove in turn that Bolshevism is not "the father" but on the contrary the very antithesis of Stalinism ?

That it is impossible "to await" a conjuncture of conditions in which the conquest of power by the proletariat is realized "peacefully" and in "ideal circumstances" ("favorable" international situation, propitious economic conjuncture, etc.) has not only been empirically demonstrated but it is moreover to be deduced from the laws of movement of decadent capitalism. In this historic stage, conditions for the realization of socialism do not improve but rather worsen from decade to decade with each missed opportunity to take power.

Kautsky explained learnedly in 1919 how dangerous it would be to take power in a chaotic international situation under the threat of civil war and with a disorganized productive apparatus. The result of this historic cowardice was the reconstruction of *capitalism* which led inevitably to the crisis of 1929, to the coming to power of Hitler, to the war of 1939 and to the total destruction of Germany in 1945.

The Stalinists, in turn, explained in 1944-45 that the international and economic situation was "too unfavorable" to take power in France, Italy, Belgium, etc. Can one doubt today that since the opportunity has been missed, the international situation has become infinitely more unfavorable and world economic chaos infinitely more aggravated,

and that on the morrow this can lead to hundreds of millions of dead in the Third World War ?

The historic merit of the Bolsheviks consists therefore in having dared for the first time to completely abolish the bourgeois state machine, to impose a severe and absolutely indispensable dictatorship on the former ruling classes and on their counter-revolutionary frenzy, and to have permitted the real blossoming of soviet *proletarian democracy* during the most difficult years. One can argue about this or that specific measure which limited this democracy under the fire of enemy guns, but the fundamental question – the one which incorporates the need of building a new type of state, a proletarian state, in place of the old apparatus of the bourgeois state – has received definitive answers in Russia and in Spain and in all the tragic revolutionary experiences of the last three decades. All the heroism and all the sacrifices of the proletariat are completely in vain if does not succeed in taking power and in organizing its own government.

This in no way constitutes a *guarantee* for the march toward socialism, but is an *indispensable condition* for this march.- It is in this sense that the Russian lesson must be understood. It is merely necessary for the structure and the function of the state to reflect the historic interest of the *proletariat*, to permit the progressive abolition of all political monopoly, the restriction of the whole body of permanent functionaries, and the exercise on a rotating basis of all executive functions by the masses of workers.

This, of course, can only be a *tendency*, only, moreover, a contradictory process which is applied on the basis of specific historic conditions of each country, and not an absolute norm to be imposed everywhere and under all conditions in the year X after the revolution. But an understanding of the relative character of this tendency does not in any way justify a pure and simple rejection of these fundamental criteria in the manner of the apologists of Stalinism.

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The Economic Significance of Proletarian Democracy

The simple mechanistic "denial" of the anarchists – which raises the notion of individual freedom to the level of an absolute norm, where it becomes an absurdity – has its complement in the mechanist "affirmation" of the Bordigists who invite us. to "abandon the fetishism of (workers') democracy." This conception leaves aside the decisive function of proletarian democracy in the organization of *genuine socialist planning*. There is no effective planning as long as the masses of consumers do not properly satisfy their needs ; as long as the workers do not feel themselves the real masters of the factories ; as long as production is not so organized as to guarantee in the first place the development of the technical abilities of the toilers, and to make them capable of progressively controlling and managing all the processes of production.

In other words : there is no real planning other than the one which is elaborated, executed and checked by the free and constant activity of thousands of *committees* which function from the factory to the top echelons of economic centralization in collective contact with the masses, which express themselves in a constant renewal of the committee personnel. It is only in this way that the great *socialist selection* will be realized in life and will lead the most downtrodden sections of humanity – the tens of thousands of technical, organizational and scientific geniuses who will replace the present-day "elite" and the "technocrat candidates" and will guarantee a rapid suppression of all social inequalities.

Progress toward socialism is to be measured by the degree of adaptation of production to consumption, the degree of effective control of the producers over production, by the degree of development of all the latent possibilities of

each producer. Otherwise, life and the real needs inevitably revolt against the bureaucratic "plans." These revolts lead to a strengthening of the apparatus of coercion and the body of functionaries who, by arrogating material privileges to themselves, disorganize planning and accelerate the whole retrogressive involution. Proletarian democracy is therefore as indispensable a condition for the victory of socialism as the assumption of power and the abolition of the bourgeois state apparatus are the indispensable conditions for the victory of the socialist revolution.

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World Government and Workers' International

The functional superiority of proletarian democracy over all other state forms consists then in this : that it permits the rapid fusion of the executive with the legislative functions, and that it allows for an *effective* democracy by facilitating the free development of every producer to the point where he becomes genuinely capable of taking his turn in all ruling functions. The administration of things is more and more substituted for the coercion of men and becomes more effective as the latter disappears.

It is no different in the sphere of international relations. The debate now raging between the representatives of American imperialism and the Russian bureaucrats on the "necessity of establishing a *world government*" versus the "safeguarding of *national sovereignty*" is just as absurd as the debate between the partisans of so-called "political democracy" and those defending so-called "progressive democracy."

American imperialism is by no means ready to accept the decisions of any international body ; its single purpose is the establishment of its imperialist rule over the entire world. The Russian bureaucrats have not "safeguarded" but crushed the national rights of the Ukrainians, Bielorusians, Poles, Germans and a score of other nationalities ; its single purpose is to prohibit the trespassing of American imperialism on its preserves.

The inability of imperialism as well as of the Russian bureaucrats to even conceive of effective agencies of "international control" results from the very state of mind which gives rise to this conception. For Washington, as well as for Moscow, "control" and "world government" signify an "international" coercion which is superimposed on "national" coercion. Alongside of the national policeman there is placed an "international" policeman whose duty is to supervise at one and the same time the supervised and the supervisors. If this framework of national or continental "organization" has already produced indescribable chaos, a world "organization" of the same character would create incredible anarchy which would likewise produce within its midst tens of bloody conflicts.

A world government will only be effective when it extends genuine freedom, acquired by the workers in the principal nations, on a world scale, freedom based upon the disappearance of all forms of exploitation and oppression. The Socialist United States of the World, basing itself on the reintegration of the bankrupt "national economies" into a world market cleared of its capitalist barriers, will attain a dynamic synthesis between social and economic world unity and the individual diversity of nations.

Faced with the threat of an atomic war and a veritable destruction, stage by stage, of the human race, a world government of councils of workers and poor peasants constitutes the only realistic alternative which gives real promise of peace and abundance.

The workers' international long ago gave expression to the *principle* of the world solidarity of the toilers and the necessary *organisation* for the daily political manifestation of this solidarity. By a dramatic reversal of events, at the very moment that technical progress places a world government squarely on the order of the day, the workers'

international appears to be weaker than ever, abandoning the field of universality to the class enemy. But this is only the superficial appearance of the situation. These same forces, while obliging official public opinion to preoccupy itself with the question of world government, render its realization absolutely Utopian within the framework of decadent capitalism, and through a thousand detours and temporary retreats prepare the conscious forces which tomorrow will lead the proletariat to a genuine world government.

The construction of the Fourth International becomes the framework for the gestation of these forces. The first proletarian organization which combines within itself the best militants of the class in all the nations of the world, the most advanced as well as the most backward, on a footing of genuine equality, is at the same time the first organization which is building a genuinely *world* movement, policy and leadership. Therein resides its functional superiority over all the workers' organizations which preceded it and therein at the same time is a sure guarantee of its final success.

September 15, 1948