

FREEDOM AND THE CLASS STRUGGLE

The question of political freedom is raised in an acute form at the present time, when Fascist bands attack working-class meetings and when the Federal Government attacks the working-class press and working-class organisations. It may be asked, then, whether representatives of the proletariat, in agitating for freedom of speech, of the press, and of organisation, are not taking a liberal line. The answer is that proletarian theory differs fundamentally from liberal theory in recognising the existence of a ruling class and an oppressed class, and in asserting that any movement for freedom can only be a movement of and on behalf of the oppressed. Hence any demand for freedom which does not take account of the class struggle is misleading, and the fight for freedom has to be conducted on class lines. Proletarian agitation, then, is for freedom of speech *for the workers*, free circulation of *the workers' press*, the right of workers to go voluntarily from one country to another, the independent organisation of workers for economic and political purposes, the formation of policies and organs of struggle.

Nevertheless, while these are the practical issues, proletarian theory regards existing society as characterised by oppression or by the exploitation of the governed class by the governing class, and it describes the struggle of the oppressed class as a struggle for *emancipation*. According to proletarian theory, moreover, the proletariat is the last class to be emancipated, and its emancipation involves the liberation of society from class struggles, the final disappearance of the exploitation of man by man. Thus the proletarian movement is definitely considered as working towards social freedom. Freedom is recognised, in opposition to exploitation and oppression, as a possible social condition. And, though a general consideration of the nature of freedom cannot provide a policy for fighting exploitation and oppression *now*, or a means of estimating existing forces of liberation (so that a merely liberal outlook is defeatist), such a consideration is obviously implied in the given description of the struggle. To make it more definite is, therefore, to advance the theory of the struggle, and may be of organisational value—in helping to rally all possible opposition to the Fascist activities of the ruling class.

The first step in the clarification of the term "freedom" is the recognition of the confusion involved in its use in political propaganda. It is one of the commonest of political catchwords, and is used to justify any policy whatever; thus "British freedom" and "freedom from Red dictation" are part of the regular demagoguery of capitalist electioneering. The confusion arises from the fact that freedom is thought of negatively as absence of restriction, and hence as the unimpeded exercise of some activity, whatever that activity may be. The position has then to be qualified by saying that there are *limits* to freedom, that freedom must not degenerate into "licence," that people cannot be left free to rob, murder, and so on. From

this point of view the demand for freedom is simply the demand to go on doing ("freely") what has been done before, or what one wants to do; and "licence" is simply that kind of activity that one wants to stop.

Thus freedom, as a capitalist catchword, means the *status quo*; "British freedom" means the maintenance of British Imperialism, and any anti-Imperialist or independent working-class activity is "licence." Bondholders want to be free to receive interest on their investments; employers want to be free to reduce wages, to pay what *they* determine for the work that *they* provide, to manage their own businesses in their own way. Working-class organisation and agitation interfere with this freedom; strikes interfere with the free working of capitalist industry. This equating of freedom with the protection of capitalist property is as old as the original "liberal" theory of society—the theory of "free contract" between man and man, of the right of the individual to determine with whom he will associate and on what terms; e.g., in the seeking or in the giving of employment. The function of the State, on this view, is merely to see that no individual infringes the rights of other individuals; apart from this, its policy is "laissez faire"; it stands aside and lets individuals make their own contracts.

It is, of course, a commonplace of Socialist theory that there is no free contract in the case; that there can be no freedom without equality; and that, while capitalist property remains, the option for the workers is a forced one. The worker's "freedom" to do without a master, if he cannot obtain satisfactory terms, is freedom to starve. It is only by organising that the workers can struggle against and reduce their economic disadvantage. In the same way, they have to struggle against *political disfranchisement*. The State, in recognising "the rights of the individual," in upholding freedom of contract between master and man, grants the worker only the right to be exploited and the right to "scab" on those who resist exploitation. It attempts to break up organisations by treating the workers as individual subjects, as in the calling up of French reservists on strike by the "Socialist" minister, Briand, or as in the present disfranchisement and deportation laws of the Commonwealth government. Such acts are an inevitable consequence of the recognition of capitalist property as a basis for "free contract."

The State, then, which, according to liberal theory, is opposed to class rights and to anything else of the nature of privilege or monopoly, is in constitutional practice opposed to *working-class rights*. Its function is to uphold capitalist property; and the function of liberalism is to deny the clash of interests which this involves, and to consider the State as upholding "natural rights," or rights independent of class. But the right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" is as incompatible with the maintenance of capitalist property as is any general right to think, read, speak, organise, or agitate freely.

Nevertheless, it is incorrect to say that the workers have no rights under capitalism, for that would be to say that they have no power. Rights are simply claims backed by force—demands that can be made good. And the workers have made good their right to be politically active; they have carried on organisation and agitation; they have formed unions and parties; conducted industrial struggles and political campaigns. This is the measure of their enfranchisement; their economic and political achievements, and not the "right" to individual employment or to an individual vote, constitute the existing rights, the actual power, of the working class. It is this that both has to be fought for, and enables the workers to fight, against capitalist oppression; it is this that is now attacked by emergency legislation, by Fascist bodies and by Social Fascists, who attempt to use the workers' own organisations for the disorganisation of the movement, i.e., as emergency organs of capitalism, and, indeed, have anticipated and given a lead to the government in the disfranchisement of militants.

The attempt at violent disfranchisement is, however, only a new form of capitalist attack, consonant with capitalism's desperate position. Working-class rights have always been attacked, because they themselves are an attack on capitalism; and their legal recognition, as far as it has gone, has been partly achieved by force and partly conceded for the sake of deception. The organisation and political activity of the working class is, as has been said, a limitation on capitalist inequality and oppression; it is that amount of freedom that has been achieved. But it is still more—it is the beginning of a free society, the preparation of the future society within the present. Hence there is no question of "pure" capitalism, of complete oppression; but the working class possesses a fragment of political power, which is its weapon in the struggle, and the ruling class strives to wrest that weapon from the workers' grasp. This, then, according to proletarian theory, is the character of the actual fight for freedom; this, as against the liberal conception, is the reality behind capitalist "democracy."

The impossibility of effective agitation on liberal lines, the absurdity of demanding rights for individuals instead of organisations and movements, is shown by a very slight consideration of the mechanism of "democracy." Clearly, the individual elector cannot make his claims good within the limits of the parliamentary system. He is confronted with two or more general policies which he has had no hand in framing, and of which, unless he is otherwise active in political affairs, he can have only a vague understanding. Merely as an elector he has no political education; censorship and the press keep him, by general consent of the parties of capitalist government, ignorant of foreign affairs and confused about home affairs. Hence the successful party is supported by different individuals for entirely different reasons, and the contention that a popular mandate has been given for the carrying out of any definite policy is quite unfounded. Indeed, the hollowness of the theory of parliamentary representation of the wills of a majority of individuals gives colour to certain demagogic criticisms of the

party system; but, of course, non-party government, consistently with the preservation of capitalist property, can only mean the suppression of all parties which might oppose or embarrass the ruling class—in a word, Fascism.

It appears, then, that only the representative of an *interest*, of an active organisation, can have a determining influence on party policy. The moneyed interest clearly has such an influence, and it can, incidentally, greatly influence the conduct of elections through being able to meet the expenses of a campaign, and, above all, through the press and, in these days, the radio. The effect of the poverty of workers' organisations is that their case never reaches a large proportion of the electors. The "choice" of individuals, then, is thoroughly circumscribed; and the same applies in the case of a plebiscite or referendum. To call this procedure in itself "democratic" is to leave out of account the influences determining what question is put and how it is presented, what agitation, in particular, takes place around it—in which respect, as before, the capitalist press has enormous advantages. There is nothing in these devices to justify the application of the term "democratic" to the form of government. Democracy can only mean general participation in the framing and carrying out of policies, and this does not exist in capitalist communities.

The undemocratic character of the parliamentary system—the fact that it is a field not of individual choice, but of the clash of interests—does not, of course, imply that it is not a field for proletarian activity. The fact that, however they may be settled, important political issues are raised there, and the fact that it permits of an approach to the broad masses of the population, make it a field for agitation, and make the parliamentary franchise a right for the proletariat to fight for. But, even so, it is only one sphere of the political struggle—the struggle between organised interests. What makes possible real political activity in this sphere is participation in the struggle in other spheres. Only such extended activity can provide an understanding of the issues raised in electoral campaigns, and only alignment with an organised interest can give any force to that activity. Hence it is that the freedom of the working class is measured by its active and intelligent participation in the struggle, by the force it can exert, the pressure it can bring to bear on capitalist forces and the capitalist State—a pressure which is no more confined to elections than the pressure of moneyed interests on home and foreign policy is confined to elections. Hence, also, the theory of freedom through parliament and of the rights of the individual under "representative" government is a falsification of the facts, and one which, as directed against the direct pressure of the working class, is in the interests of the ruling class.

This raises the question: is it simply a matter of a clash of interests—of freedom for capitalists versus freedom for workers? If that were so, there would be no point in the description of the latter as the oppressed and exploited class, and there would be