Introduction to Part 2

The year 1928 marked a turning point in the global communist movement. Lenin’s death in 1924 was followed by a bitter tug of war between different factions within the Bolshevik Party, ending with the expulsion of Trotsky and Stalin’s rise to power. Comintern General Secretary Nikolai Bukharin coined the term ‘Third Period’ at the Seventh Plenum of the Executive Committee of the Comintern (ECCI) in 1926, anticipating a new rise of the revolutionary movement outside Soviet Russia. According to him, capitalism had moved from a post-war crisis to a (second) period of consolidation and stabilisation and had pushed the international proletariat on the defensive. Nevertheless, in Bukharin’s mind, the inherent weaknesses of capitalism were to lead to an outburst of renewed working class radicalism during the forthcoming Third Period.¹

Under Stalin’s aegis, the Soviet Union turned inwards and focussed on rapid industrialisation and collectivisation of agrarian production. Soviet direct involvement in China, its support to the Guomindang and the Chinese Communist Party had ended in a debacle in 1927. International relations with the major imperial powers, Britain and France, had turned sour. Soviet foreign policy had hitherto achieved only one positive result, namely the 1922 Rapallo agreement with Weimar Germany. Other states considered the Soviet Union to be a pariah at best and a threat to the existing world-order at worst, especially as long as the call for World Revolution continued to be disseminated from Moscow. However, Stalin’s push for “Socialism in One Country”, which theses had originally been formulated by Bukharin but put forth by Stalin in 1924, resulted in a shift in Soviet foreign policy that was to have grave consequences for the global communist movement for the coming decade.²

The new era deeply affected the Comintern and its affiliated organisations and “sympathising mass-movements.” The expulsion of Trotsky and Zinoviev, the leaders of the ‘left-wing opposition’, from the Bolshevik Party in November 1927, the crisis in China, and an impending “imperialist” attack on the Soviet

Union dominated the agenda of the Eighth and Ninth Plenary Meetings of the ECCI in May 1927 and February 1928. The meetings resulted in calls for an intensification of class struggle, a radicalisation of the working class, and an increased vigilance to defend the Soviet Union. The latter meeting also put an end to the United Front-tactic. The bourgeoisie had launched an offensive against the working class, the ECCI declared, and branded social democratic politicians and trade union leaders as lackeys of the bourgeoisie and betrayers of the working class at the most critical moment. Therefore, the ECCI instigated that the communist’s task was to apply new tactics for seizing the leadership of strikes. Most importantly, it was their duty “to expose the treacherous attitude of the reformists and, when the opportunity is favourable, organise strikes against the will of the trade union bureaucracy.” The new tactic put heavy focus on approaching the unions and their members “from below.” The key unit for capturing the local branches of trade unions was the factory committee; existing or new factory committees were to be dominated by the communists, and were to constitute the basic organisations of industrial unions.3

The new tactic was cemented at the Fourth World Congress of the RILU in April 1928 and the Sixth World Congress of the Comintern in August/September 1928. The congresses condemned the former tactic of cooperation with socialist/reformist/social democratic parties and organisations,4 and issued the ‘Class-Against-Class’-doctrine and declined any further cooperation with the socialist or radical bourgeois organisations and activists. The Comintern’s reading of the current situation was that the class struggle had reached a new phase – the Third Period – and a new wave of revolutionary activity was expected. The ‘Class-Against-Class’-doctrine resulted in the ‘Stalinisation’ of various national communist parties.5 Ultimately, the strategic

turn of the Comintern was closely linked to the political manoeuvres in the Kremlin, Stalin’s rise to power and the fear of the Bolshevik leadership of an imminent military attack against Soviet-Russia and an ‘imperialist war’ by Great Britain and France to erase the ‘Fatherland of the Toilers’.

The ‘United-Front’-tactic of the RILU came to an end with the shift to the ‘Class-Against-Class’-doctrine. Branded as the ‘United front from below’-tactic, the new policy was sanctioned at a meeting held in Strassburg in January 1929. According to the so-called Strassburg Theses, rank-and-file union members were to be organised in “independent” strike committees led by the communist trade union opposition – independent, as their leadership were to be elected by the union members and not nominated by trade union functionaries and leaders. The latter were branded as ‘social fascists’, and declared to be the main enemy of the working class. If the ‘social fascist’ onslaught within a union barred the activities of its revolutionary opposition, its members were ordered to establish independent revolutionary or red trade unions. Moscow subsequently sent directives to all communist parties about the formation of red unions. In Germany, this resulted in the foundation of the Revolutionary Trade Union Opposition (Revolutionäre Gewerkschaftsopposition, RGO). In the USA, the CPUSA created several revolutionary craft unions as well as established the Trade Union Unity League (TUUL) as a red union centre; in Canada, the Workers’ Unity League (WUL) was established in December 1929 while the Minority Movement (MM) was revived in the United Kingdom.

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8 Manley, “Moscow Rules?,” 18–22.