COMMUNIST MANIFESTO and Its Origins

CHAPTER FOUR (Continued from the last Issue)

Reaction and the Prelude to the International

In 1850 Marx addressed the remnants of the Communist League. What he said is interesting in many ways. We can see the limitations that were imposed upon his outlook by the conditions of the time, and his unshaken revolutionary fervour. He called attention to the weakening of the League and the urgency of reorganization in view of another revolutionary upsurge that was impending, and he also stressed the fact that, as prophesied in the Manifesto, the capitalists had turned their newly acquired powers against the workers, in spite of the fact that the latter had supported them in the struggle.

The address is significant in one respect; it shows how specifically German the Communist League was, as the matter discussed almost entirely refers to developments in Germany and to future prospects there. Although Marx and Engels spent most of their lives in England, and the material for Capital was mainly drawn from English sources, the progress of the socialist movement in Germany was always their principal lifelong pre-occupation. It was in Germany that they acquired their early revolutionary enthusiasm, and the nostalgia of those early times retained a hold on their affections for the rest of their lives. Even at the end of their lives we find both of them looking hopefully, and perhaps a little wistfully, to Germany as the possible starting point of the socialist revolution; at the same time this nostalgia led them to overestimate the ponderous superstructure of the German Social Democratic Party, the frail basis of which was exposed during the first World War and after the impact of the Russian Bolshevik upheaval.

In the Address to the League Marx again urges that the working class should support the struggles of other oppressed but progressive sections of the population with the object of clearing the ground gradually for the final victory of the workers. But he vigorously opposes unity with these sections, arguing that the workers movement must always remain independent, as any union with capitalist groups would only redound to the advantage of the latter:

> "Such a union would turn out solely to their advantage and altogether to the disadvantage of the proletariat. The proletariat would lose its whole independent, laboriously obtained position and once more sink down to being an appendage of official bourgeois democracy. This union must, therefore, be most decisively rejected. Instead of once again stooping to serve as the applauding chorus of the bourgeois democrats, the workers, and above all the League, must strive to establish an independent, secret and open, organisation of the Workers' Party alongside the official democrats and make each local section the central point and nucleus of Workers' Associations in which the attitude and interests of the proletariat will be discussed independently of bourgeois influence." (Karl Marx "Selected Works" Vol. 2, P. 162.)

How true this argument for independence is has been shown by the subsequent history of working class agitation during which, even up to the present day, the workers movement has remained little more than an appendage of one or other of the capitalist political parties. But Marx then goes on to argue for a policy which expected far too much from workers who acquired political knowledge whilst spending arduous days working for a living. It is worth while stressing this point because it has become the stock policy of slavish advocates of the correctness of every phrase written by Marx, and has helped to land the movement into a bog of bewilderment. Marx is urging that the workers can still remain an independent political party while at the same time fighting alongside opposition parties for limited objects in the immediate interest of all.

> "In the case of a struggle against a common opponent no special union is required. As soon as such an opponent has to be fought directly, the interests of both parties, for the moment, coincide, and, as previously, so also in the future, this union calculated only for the moment will arise of itself. It is self-evident that in the coming bloody conflicts, as in all earlier ones, it is the workers who, in the main, will have to win the victory by their courage, determination and self-sacrifice.'

Marx goes on to point out that "the petty bourgeois" will be as vacillating as ever, and must be pushed on to implement their former threats; that they will afterwards call upon the workers to remain tranquil and return to their work, but the workers must continue their efforts to maintain the revolution.

> "It is not in the power of the workers to restrain the petty bourgeois democrats from doing this, but it is in their power to make it difficult for them to push forward in the face of the armed proletariat and to dictate such conditions to them that the rule of the bourgeois democrats from the outset bears within it the seeds of its downfall, and their later supplanting by the rule of the proletariat will be considerably facilitated." (Page 163).

It will be noticed that behind this attitude lurks the expectation of the early conquest of power by the workers. The course of events rapidly brought disillusionment. Marx outlived the idea of an armed uprising of the people and later said, with Engels, that the day of the barricades and street fighting had passed away. The growth of state power, and modern means of warfare, in the advanced countries cleared from the minds of all but "the idle singer of an empty day" the idea of working class victory by means of the "armed people." The resuscitation of this attitude, by those who anticipate the outbreak of social revolution as the aftermath of war, will be discussed when the theories connected with the Bolshevik movement are considered. We will confine ourselves for the moment to the fact that the policy, advocated throughout the address by Marx, was too subtle for those he was addressing to be capable of putting into operation, without losing their way in the process. And they certainly did lose their way. Here, for example, is a statement by Marx that was never digested:

> "Even where there is no prospect whatsoever of their being elected, the workers must put up their own candidates in order to preserve their independence, to count their forces and to bring before the public their revolutionary attitude and party standpoint. In this connection they must not allow themselves to be seduced by the phrases of the democrats, such as, for example, that by this action they are splitting the Democratic Party and giving the reaction the possibility of victory. The final intention of all such phrases is that the proletariat shall be duped. The advance which the proletarian party is bound to make by such an independent action is infinitely more important than the disadvantage that might be caused by the presence of a few reactionaries in the representative body." (Page 165).

At the end of the address Marx says that in their opposition to the democrats, when the latter come to power, the workers must not in the beginning propose any directly communist measures, but only more radical reforms; in time these must be transformed into more extreme measures, such as the confiscation of factories and railways without compensation. Unfortunately, it was the reform policy advocated, rather than the independence urged, that attracted the chief attention and was implemented, though this did not extend to confiscation without compensation.

We shall later see how other portions of this address were eagerly gobbled up by those who thought they had found a short cut to the fundamental re-organisation of society.

The "Address to the Communist League" marked almost the end of