IS VIOLENCE NECESSARY

"Social revolutions," we are told, "have always been and will inevitably be brought about to the accompaniment of bloodshed and violence."

"The capitalists are not going to stand idly by while a growing socialist movement threatens to 'throw the rascals out'," declare those in the know. "While we certainly do not advocate the use of violence, history has taught us that it is the ruling class that always instigates the violence and therefore the workers must expect and be prepared to meet any physical onslaught brought on by the capitalists." This is the position that is generally put forth by the professed champions and intellectual vanguards of the workers.

Perhaps one of the most effective presentations of this viewpoint was made by James P. Cannon, head of the Socialist Workers Party (Trotzkyist), at his defence in the Minneapolis "sedition" trial in 1941. In his answers to his attorney's* questions, Mr. Cannon stated the attitude of his party as follows:

Q. Do you believe you can accomplish the control or acquisition, shall we say, of governmental power by being elected to it?

A: We can accomplish it if we are not interfered with by violence on the part of the capitalists.

Q: You mean, the capitalists are not going to let you be elected?

A: When we say that it is an illusion to expect that we can effect the social transformation by parliamentary action, that doesn't mean that we don't want to do it, or that we wouldn't gladly accept such a method. We don't believe, on the basis of our knowledge of history, and on the basis of our knowledge of the greed and rapacity of the American ruling class, that they will permit that kind of a solution.

Mr. Cannon continued by pointing out that the American capitalists could easily forestall any working class victory at the polls by merely abrogating elections, penalizing and restricting the functions of workers' parties and/or organizing and subsidizing "a fascist movement with the aim of destroying the labor movement by force before it has an opportunity to test its strength in elections."

The foregoing is a substantial summing-up of the position on this question held not only by Mr. Cannon and his party but also by his Communist Party opposition together with all the splits and splinter groups that have been whittled off the original party and its Trotzkyist offspring.

On the other side of the "barricades" we have the ruling class in both Western and Russian orbits, possessors and controllors of the most violent weapons that man has ever invented, weapons capable of wiping out entire cities with but a single blast, terrified and blustering not only at each other but also at the unarmed workers within their gates who may dream of using violence against them. Yes, the question as to whether or not violence should be advocated by workers as a means of overthrowing capitalism is one that bothers a lot of people in both economic classes.

There is, however, a sounder outlook on this question — the outlook held by scientific socialists. Are we opposed to the advocacy of violence as a means of accomplishing the socialist revolution? Most assuredly we are, but without the qualifications and reservations made by those 20th Century radicals with 19th Century theories. We are opposed to the advocacy of violence by the working class because we have the intelligence and understanding to know that one does not pit bare hands, clubs or even spirrel guns against the weapons in the control of the capitalist class.

This is not to say that we can not foresee a great deal of violence between the contending classes before we achieve socialism. Violence is a product of— grows out of the existence of — a society divided into economic classes. Whether it is deliberately instigated by capitalist agents for various reasons such as sales promotion of tear-gas and barbed wire fences or the simple desire on the part of the capitalists to egg on a militant working-class into a "test of strength"; or whether roused by the so-called intellectual vanguards of the workers, the scientific socialist movement can but protest this useless and senseless butchery of its fellow-workers and urge them to resist any attempt to precipitate them into a show of force against overwhelming odds.

"But," say our opponents, "what do you expect the workers to do if and when the capitalists organize a fascist movement and set out to crush the labor organizations? Or if the ruling class, in the name of a 'communist' or "socialist' state wipes out every vestige of democracy? Should they just lay down and die — or submit to tyranny without a fight?" This is the strongest type of question that can be hurled at us. For isn't there plenty of historical precedent? Look at Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Germany of yesterday. Look at Stalin's Russia; Tito's Yugoslavia; Czechoslovakia; Hungary; Poland; China, North and So. Korea etc. of today. Isn't there evidence enough in the world today that workers' movements have been crushed and will continue to be crushed whenever possible wherever the ruling class interests are threatened?

Unfortunately both for us and our radical opposition, this type of argument is difficult to clear up, for it displays a colossal lack of understanding on the part of the questioners of the forces that gave rise to Fascism, Nazism and "Communism." There is no such thing as a clear-cut fight involved here between capitalist minorities and working class anti-capitalist majorities. There is, on the other hand, evidence in plenty both of mass support and apathetic unconcern for the Nazi, Fascist and "Communist" movements by the workers in the very lands where those movements conquered. It took the support and/or acquiescence of masses of working people in these countries to gain power and once in control of the state machinery, any faction of the ruling class finds it a lot easier to hold the loyalty of the majority by means of head-fixing or propaganda.

In America, too, there is plenty of evidence that the most "advanced" of the labor and radical movements supports capitalism to the limit — would even support an outright abrogation of its own rights in the interests of saving American capitalism from its Russian state-capitalist enemies; or even, were it necessary, against the pitifully weak scientific socialist movement. That such a state of affairs exists among the workers, however, is merely indicative of the fact that socialist knowledge has made no impressive inroads any place in the world. Even in pre-Hitler Germany, where the "communist" and social democratic movements were strong, each demonstrated its lack of socialist consciousness by a support of one capitalist group against another. Had the German workers been revolutionary in fact instead of merely in name; had the communists in Russia been Marxists rather than Russia patriots; it would have been impossible for Nazism to have attained power.

The problem in Italy, Germany and Russia was not one of a fight between capitalism and a strong socialist movement, but rather one of how best to operate capitalism and the antagonists were not capitalist against socialist but two rival capitalist groups, each employing for the dirty work involved, the services of masses of duped workers. When the problem actually becomes one of how to maintain capitalism against a socialist threat it would be foolhardy, to say the least, for the capitalists to attempt violence, for by the time the problem was serious enough

*Albert Goldman, an S. W. P. member and co-defendent in the trial.