Review Article

COALITION BUILDING, CAPITALISM AND WAR-OF JOHN RIDDELL'S, TO THE MASSES: PROCEEDINGS OF THE THIRD CONGRESS OF THE COMMUNIST INTERNATIONAL, 1921¹

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Abstract

We are entering the centenary of the revolutionary upheavals which convulsed Europe and Asia in the wake of the First World War. Sustained by those upheavals, a new left emerged grappling with the daunting challenges of trying to create an alternative to capitalism and war. John Riddell's three decades of effort to publish the proceedings of the First Four Congresses of the Communist International (Comintern) are part of a new generation working to make available to an English speaking audience some of the key disucssions and deliberations of the left in that era. His latest volume - "To the Masses" surveying the discussions of the Third Comintern Congress completes this work. Focussing on the united front - what a contemporary left would call "coalition building" - the book is an invaluable resource both to our understanding of this period, and to the challenges our new left faces in the still ongoing struggle against capitalism and war.

Keywords

Russia; Germany; Levi; Luxemburg; Levi

European civilization degenerated into horrifying violence during the "Great War" of 1914-1918. In the wake of that war, upheavals shook old empires to their foundations, as literally millions of peasants and workers rejected old patterns of life and rule, and sought out new ways of organizing society freed from the barbarism of war and capitalism. A vigorous left wing developed in many countries on the backs of this revolutionary upheaval, but only a fraction of the writings and discussions of this left have been available to an English-speaking audience. That is beginning to change. Ten years ago, Ian Birchall translated Pierre Broué's classic *The German Revolution*, *1917-1923* (2006). Peter Hudis is spearheading the preparation into English of the

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indispensable works of Rosa Luxemburg (Luxemburg 2004; Luxemburg 2013; Luxemburg 2015). And since the 1980s, John Riddell has been translating, editing and publishing the key documents and discussions of the Communist International (or Comintern). *To the Masses* (Riddell 2015)² – whose subject matter is the Third Congress – completes the record of the first four congresses of the Comintern, congresses identified by Leon Trotsky as important events where key questions of the day had "been subjected ... to a principled analysis that has remain unsurpassed until now" (Trotsky 1933, 40). Riddell's books will serve as a resource for years. By allowing an English-speaking audience access to the unfiltered words of the congress participants, the books allow a new generation to assess for themselves the merits of their theories, strategies and practices.

The central question confronting participants at the Third Congress – the subject of this latest volume – was the complicated situation in Germany. It is in the cauldron of the German Revolutionary years, running roughly from 1917 to 1923, that the tactic of the United Front crystallized, the central theme of both the Third and the Fourth Congresses. The United Front method is one by which minority currents of politicized activists – around a defined set of demands – seek unity in action with those who hold a different set of politics. To use contemporary language, we might call this "coalitionbuilding". One of the key events of the German revolutionary years, what came to be known as the March Action of 1921, brought into sharp relief the catastrophic consequences of not engaging in serious and sincere coalition building.

At the time of the March Action, the KPD (German Communist Party) while a mass party, nonetheless represented a small minority of the working class, far smaller and less influential than the traditional party of German labour, the Social Democratic Party (SPD). Nonetheless, the KPD tried, in its own name, to call a general strike. Predictably, the strike failed miserably, tens of millions ignoring the call. Pierre Broué says that perhaps 200,000 - at most 500,000 workers chose to participate (Broué 2006, 501). We read in To the Masses that, tragically, it is likely the former figure that is more accurate. "In Session 5, Heinrich Malzahn of the German opposition estimated that strikers totalled only two hundred thousand – just over half the party's pre-March membership – a figure not challenged in the congress" (20). Worse, the March Action was associated with numerous acts of violence by the small minority supporting the strike, violence directed against the vast majority who had chosen not to follow the KPD. "[T]he strike took on the character of a fratricidal struggle. Indeed, in many instances, Communists battled non-Communists among the workforce; in some cases workers were cleared out of the workplace by force" (20). The repression which followed saw 400 KPD members "sentenced to some 1,500 years hard labour, and 500 to 800 years in jail, eight to life imprisonment and four to death" something like 200,000 leaving the party in disgust and demoralization (Broué 2006, 505).

² Further references to this text are made with only the page number in parentheses.

The tragedy of the March Action was shaped by what came to be known as the Theory of the Offensive. This theory asserted that "offensive", sometimes insurrectionary tactics are appropriate, even when communists are a small minority of the working class and the oppressed. It was at the root of not just the 1921 political catastrophe in Germany, but a 1920 military catastrophe for the Russian state in its war with Poland (Kellogg 2013). *To the Masses* early on links these two episodes, saying:

... the Red Army's Polish offensive inspired an article by Nikolai Bukharin in the Comintern's world journal, headlined "The Policy of the Offensive," which drew on precedents from the French revolutionary wars of the 1790s to make the case that Soviet military advances could spark revolution beyond Soviet borders. In the run-up to the Third Congress, Bukharin's formula was born to a new life in the theory developed by the German party's majority leadership to justify its adventurist policy" (6–7).

So dangerous was this theory, that critiques of it ran "like a red thread through" Leon Trotsky's "writings and speeches of this period" (Deutscher 1954, 1:473). Trotsky called the Theory of the Offensive "a very great and criminal heresy, which cost the German proletariat needless bloodshed and which did not bring victory, and were this tactic to be followed in the future it would bring about the ruin of the revolutionary movement in Germany" (1981, 5:306; quoted in Kellogg 2013, 185).

There is today, much agreement, that the March Action was an irresponsible adventure, shattering the party and isolating it from the mass of the German working class. However, around one key aspect of this experience - the role of KPD leader Paul Levi – there is little unanimity. Levi opposed the March Action. He was clearly correct in this. Yet he ended up outside the ranks of the party in its wake. The late Chris Harman characterized this as his "departure from the party", a "resignation barely a week before the [March] Action" (1982, 211). This is wrong and misleading. Harman is here conflating two quite different episodes. The first was in February 22, when Levi, Zetkin and three others resigned - not from the party, but from the party's leading body (Fernbach 2011, 17). His "departure" from the party came April 15, and it was not voluntary. Levi was expelled from the party by the very leading body he had left just weeks before (Broué 2006, 516). The verbal move from the highly charged (and accurate) term "expulsion" to the neutral and ambiguous term "departure", has the effect of minimizing the error of the KPD leadership. It also disarms the reader who, if they choose to examine the career and role of Paul Levi, will inevitably encounter "the traditional epithets and insults of 'traitor' and 'renegade'" ... which comprise the bulk of the Stalinist-influenced scholarship on this period, a line of argument which shamefully and inaccurately portrays Levi "as no more than a 'class enemy' and a potential traitor, even when he was a leader of the KPD" (Broué 2006, 875).

To the Masses gives us ammunition to correct the historical record. Levi's "crime", for which he was expelled, was to have published in the non-party press a pamphlet critical of the party's role in the March Action (Levi 1921) – a pamphlet whose essential analysis has stood the test of time. Chris Harman's co-thinker, Ian Birchall, unhelpfully calls Levi's action "political scabbing" (Birchall 2006, 266), something which only serves to heighten the emotion around the issue, and lessen the chance of reasoned, political inquiry. The expulsion of Levi for the publication of a pamphlet was a sign of the degeneration – not of Levi – but of the KPD.

Levi, being an expelled member, was not present at the Third Congress. But in Riddell's book, almost 100 years later, he returns in spirit. Some of the most exciting aspects of *To the Masses* can be found in the appendices, one of which is entitled "Paul Levi Appeals to Third Congress, 31 May" (1090–97), a closely worded condemnation of the tactics of the KPD leadership, and an indictment of the actions of the Comintern representative in Germany (the Hungarian Béla Kun). We also have the "Resolution by Clara Zetkin on March Action" (1079–86) a cogent defence of the "to the masses" united front approach. Making these texts available is a huge contribution.

We can also hear in the appendices, in a letter to Lenin, the chilling voice of this same Béla Kun unapologetically defending the March Action. "Beyond any question, the March Action has brought us great political and organisational successes and will bring us many more in the future", an absurd statement which flies in the face of the historical record. We also have, in his own words, insights into his unsavoury methods. "Levi and Zetkin are utter *hysterics*" he says "and what they are saying in the German party right now consists of nothing but lying gossip. No one can believe it contains even a grain of truth". Kun proclaims that Paul Levi is "universally recognised as dangerous". On one occasion, says Kun "Levi tried to conceal his swinishness and stupidity behind Radek's authority". But his worst venom is reserved for Levi's close comrade, Clara Zetkin. "As for the statements of the aged comrade Zetkin, I would like to say only this: the old woman is suffering from senile dementia. She provides a living proof that Lafargue and his wife acted entirely correctly" referring to the suicide of Paul Lafargue and Laura Marx (1088–90).

These words – appropriate, not to a serious activist, but rather to a petty, personalistic, bureaucrat – come from what was meant as a private letter to Lenin. Its preservation and publication give us an insight into the character and methods of one of the key figures of the era. The impression formed is not flattering. Worse, we now know that in slandering and denouncing Levi and Zetkin, he was slandering and denouncing the two figures most closely associated with developing the United Front / coalition-building method which is the chief contribution of these congresses to the contemporary left. Levi, Clara Zetkin and others developed their politics in that section of the German Left influenced by the politics of Rosa Luxemburg. Luxemburg – from a position of deep respect for the Russian revolutionaries – knew that Bolshevik methods could not be

adapted without amendment to the very different circumstances of Germany. The Luxemburgist current in the German left insisted that strategy and tactics shaped by the experience of the revolution in Russia – a country with pockets of industry surrounded by a sea of peasants – had to be radically modified in order to fit the extremely different conditions prevailing in urban, industrialized Germany (Kellogg and Riddell 2013; Kellogg 2012).

One example can illustrate why we should study Levi's section of the left and its unique approach to strategies and tactics. An early and important moment in the development of the United Front method began with the metalworkers' union in Stuttgart and its 1920 call for a local "joint struggle" uniting the minority current of communist with the mass of non-communist workers, a joint struggle "for concrete improvement in the workers' living conditions" (Riddell 2011, 6). This initiative inspired the issuing of an *Open Letter* from the KPD, calling for the same approach on a national scale.

To the Masses makes available the full text of the Open Letter, indicating that "the drafters appear to have been Paul Levi and Karl Radek". The letter calls for workers' organizations to work together and "begin unified struggles for higher wages … raise all payments to victims of the War and pensioners in line with the demanded wage increases … grant the unemployed across the whole country uniform payments … distribute foodstuffs at reduced prices to all wage earners and those with low incomes … confiscate immediately all available habitable spaces" and other very practical, very realizable immediate reforms to improve the conditions of the poor and working class population of post-war Germany (1061–63).

The origins of the Open Letter in Stuttgart, shows the importance of developments in Germany. "Late in 1920, a meeting representing 26,000 Stuttgart metalworkers called for joint struggle for a list of basic demands; the appeal was published 10 December 1920. It was the first formulation of the united front policy that the Comintern was to adopt a year and eight days later" (15). It also highlights the central role of Levi and Zetkin. Stuttgart was not just any city. Levi, on returning from the war to Germany in 1918 made his centre of work Berlin, but "maintained his connections with Stuttgart where Clara Zetkin lived, where the Spartacists had a majority among the local Independent Socialists (USPD), and where Levi helped organize deserters from the armed forces" (Fernbach 2011, 5–6), the Spartacists being the group around Luxemburg which became the core of the KPD.

The Open Letter's sensible, careful call for united action – for coalition building – was unfortunately rejected by the leadership of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the party to which adhered the vast majority of German workers. However, it was also met with derision from the "left" section of the communists in Germany who denounced it as reformist – this being the section that was to shortly displace Levi and Zetkin and take the KPD into the catastrophe of the March Action.

But, if rejected by the SPD leaders and the communist left, The Open Letter was greeted with enthusiasm at the base of the workers' movement. Zetkin is quoted in *To the Masses* about the impact of the Open Letter. "The demands of the Open Letter had as their result that the masses organised in trade unions drove the union bureaucracy forward" (1080). Revolutionary shop steward and KPD member Heinrich Malzahn said that the Open Letter allowed the KPD to "win a powerful influence before the March Action"

This Open Letter, together with the slogan of a workers' and employees' united front against the employers' general offensive, won for us the trust of the working class. The best measure of the extent of our trade-union influence is the fact that the union bureaucrats felt that their power was threatened and responded by dismissing union staffers and expelling Communists. That did not harm us, but rather contributed to increasing the party's reputation and influence. (501)

It could have this impact because, after its publication, in January of 1921, meeting after meeting took place endorsing the letter's call for unity in struggle.

The KPD... called on the workers to organise democratic assemblies in order to impose their demands on their leaders, and to declare their will to undertake a general struggle to win them. Such meetings took place, and the Communist proposals were approved by workers who were either not in parties or were members of one or other of the Social-Democratic Parties.

On 11 January 1921, the delegate meeting of the workers in the Vulkan naval shipyard in Stettin took place, on 17 January, that of the production workers and office staff at Siemens in Berlin, in the Busch Circus, on the 19th that of the railwaymen in Munich, and in the days which followed, meetings of the metalworkers in Danzig, Leipzig, Halle and Essen, of the railwaymen in Leipzig, Schwerin, Brandenburg and Berlin, the national congresses of the saddle-makers and the carpet weavers, the meetings of the miners in Dorstfeld, and a large workers' gathering in Jena, all fully endorsed the Open Letter, and called for a struggle to be organised around its demands. (Broué 2006, 471–72)

To the Masses reveals the unevenness in response from leading Russian communists to this very fine initiative. Zinoviev called it "quite artificial ... I do not believe that one can call on the workers to form an alliance with other workers' parties" (1064). Bukharin agreed. The Open Letter approach he said "is not revolutionary. After all, we want communism; we want the dictatorship of the proletariat ... But what the

letter says is that we want the proletariat to live. That is bizarre. Are we living for a new capitalism? ... The [Open Letter] programme does not correspond at all to Communist demands" (1064).

So – an inability to understand the need for coalition-building was not the preserve of irresponsible elements in the German party, or bureaucratic figures like Béla Kun, but went right to the top of the Russian party, in historic figures such as Zinoviev and Bukharin. We also learn that Lenin completely sided with Zetkin and Levi and the Open Letter approach, putting himself in opposition to the German "lefts" and to Zinoviev and Bukharin. In a letter to Zetkin and Levi he called it "an entirely correct policy (I have condemned the contrary opinion of our "Lefts" who were opposed to the letter)" (1087). To the Masses also makes available the text of Trotsky's hour-long speech on strategy and tactics, a brilliant refutation of the ultra-left position, and a defence of the united-front / coalition-building approach (571–83). Even today, almost 100 years later, it retains its relevance.

So, there is much to learn from in *To The Masses* in a positive sense. There are also many negative lessons. Levi had been expelled before the Congress and before the debate. A vote to endorse this expulsion was pushed through *before* the debate on the March Action. "Levi's appeal to the congress demanding reversal of his expulsion (Appendix 2f, 1090–97) was apparently not made available to the delegates". Levi stayed outside the KPD and the Comintern, even though his political positions were endorsed. And Kun – whose political positions were thoroughly demolished and discredited – remained a treasured member of the movement's leadership. This juxtaposition alone – the baning of Levi and the protection of Kun – indicates deep problems in the Comintern project. One year later, at the Fourth Congress of the Comintern, back to back speeches were made to mark the fifth anniversary of the Russian Revolution – one by Zetkin, one by Kun (Riddell 2011, 305–45). One can only imagine what Zetkin thought of the twinning of herself with that of Kun.

There is much, much more in this rich, detailed, careful documentation of an extraordinary moment in the history of the workers' movement. Riddell and his collaborators have done us the service of presenting these proceedings in an extremely scholarly fashion, putting them in context with a comprehensive 50-page introductory essay. There are short biographies of each of the participants, a carefully prepared index without which the 1200 pages would be much harder to navigate, and footnotes throughout to clarify points that will be obscure to a 21st century reader. In the spirit of the Comintern – where lively debates were daily fare – a survey of some of these footnotes might suggest areas where further discussion is warranted. Here I will highlight three.

The KPD in Germany became a mass party through its fusion, in 1920, with the left-wing of the USPD. About this we learn the following. "At the Halle Congress of the USPD ... held 12-17 October, 1920, a majority of the delegates voted to accept the

Twenty-One Conditions and join the Comintern ... Zinoviev gave the main speech in support of Comintern affiliation" (204 note 42). This is true, but incomplete. What we can now add is that the key legwork had been done in the years preceding the Halle Congress by the KPD leadership under Levi. The party he inherited after the assassination of Luxemburg was a party riven with ultraleft "March Action" style politics. In 1919, he succeeded in separating from these elements, an expulsion which reduced the party from about 100,000 members to about 50,000. But liberated from the "March Action" section of the party, he was able to begin negotiations with the left-wing of the massive USPD and its 800,000 members (Lewis 2011, 22 note 38). "Levi approached the leaders of its left wing, who agreed to co-operate on a unifying tactic" (Fernbach 2011, 10). Zinoviev might have given a great speech, a speech which we now have in English along with the riveting counter-position put by the Russian anti-war revolutionary Julius Martov (Zinoviev and Martov 2011). Ben Lewis says that "the long hard work of Zinoviev and [the] Comintern yielded a good harvest" (Lewis 2011, 31). This minimizes the role of the soon-to-be expelled Levi. Zinoviev's speech would never have had an audience without the careful organizing of Levi in the preceding years.

Béla Kun was shaped by his experience in the Hungarian Revolution of 1918-1919. About this we learn that: "A soviet republic was established in Hungary 21 March 1919 ... The new government adopted a number of revolutionary measures ... It also implemented a series of utraleft measures that increasingly isolated it, such as refusing to give expropriated land to poor peasants and overhasty collectivisation" (276 note 3). We now have new resources in English to add to this, specifically Paul Levi's brilliant critique of the Hungarian events, written just days after the Communists took power. Levi warned that the Hungarian soviet republic came not from proletarian strength, but from capitalist weakness and that "the possibility for the dictatorship of the proletariat exists not when the bourgeoisie collapses but when the proletariat rises" (Levi 1920, 71–72). He reminded readers of the program of the Spartacists. "The Spartacus League will never take over governmental power except in response to the clear, unambiguous will of the great majority of the proletarian mass of all of Germany" (Luxemburg 1918, 356-57). Tragically, 133 days later, Levi's warnings about substitutionist methods – the left taking power without basing itself on the mass self-activity of the working class – proved correct, when the now completely isolated communists had to flee for their lives, ushering in years of right-wing dictatorship.

Finally, we also have new resources to help understand the origins of the catastrophic "Theory of the Offensive," one of the recurring themes of the book. "The 'theory of the offensive' was advanced by majority leaders in the KPD after the 1921 March Action to justify their policies in launching the action and their proposal that such policies continue. It was rooted in previous texts by Béla Kun ... and, in another context, by Bukharin ..." (208 note 49). We have multiple examples in the Third Congress and at the Fourth Congress of this offensive being brilliantly critiqued by Trotsky and Lenin. But

these men were not all-seeing. Lenin, for instance, while a critic of the theory of the offensive by the time of the Third Congress, the year previous had practiced it - with disastrous consequences - in the invasion of Poland. "In April 1920 Polish troops launched an offensive in soviet Ukraine. The Red Army was able to push them back into Polish territory and then continued its advance toward Warsaw, where it was stopped. Soviet troops were then forced to retreat. An armistice ending the war was signed in October" (90 note 29). This is true but incomplete. The decision to move from a defensive war to an offensive one - meaning an invasion of Poland by Russian troops - was hotly contested in the Bolshevik Party. In the aftermath, in a speech to communist party members, a speech which Lenin insisted not be made public ("I request that less be taken down, this must not get into the newspapers"), Lenin explained the thinking of his wing of the party, which had argued for the invasion, saying that "the defensive war with imperialism had ended ... and we could and must make use of the military situation to begin an offensive war. We had beaten them when they attacked us. Now we would try to attack them, so as to help sovietise Poland. We would help to sovietise Lithuania and Poland ... amongst ourselves we said that we must probe with bayonets to discover whether the social revolution of the proletariat was ripe in Poland" (Lenin 1920, 140-41). Not only did this result in a catastrophe – "a huge defeat" in Lenin's words – it also runs completely counter to the self-emancipation politics outlined by Levi and the Spartacists. A country will only be "sovietised" by the "will of the great majority" through the selfactivity and self-organization of the vast majority of the oppressed and exploited. It will certainly not be sovietised through the grotesque "probing with bayonets" by an invading army as suggested by Lenin.

There are other areas opened by *To the Masses*, where discussion and debate are warranted. The suppression of the 1921 Kronstadt revolt (213 note 61), the dispersal of the Constituent Assembly (470 note 18), the Theses on the Organisational Question (810 note 1) and the 1905 Revolution (475 note 24) are all subjects, briefly touched on in the book, which hopefully – in this the centenary of the 1917 revolution – will be taken up and discussed by others. Here, all we can do is insert a bookmark, and indicate they are subjects around which more discussion will be required.

Speaking about an earlier volume in this series, Abbie Bakan cautioned that we must not approach it as "a textbook, but a history book" (Riddell 2012). This is as true for *To the Masses* as it is for the other books in the series. This is not a text book. There are not formulae here which we can automatically apply to our own conditions. In Canada, we don't live in a sea of peasants, as they did in Russia. In Canada, we aren't just emerging into parliamentary democracy after the fall of a Kaiser, as they were in Germany. In Canada, we are not organizing in the shadow of a Great War which killed millions of our youth, as they were in Germany and Russia. In Canada we have decades of experience of mass social movements against oppression – Idle No More, Black Lives Matter, the Quebec Student strike – on terrain very different from the terrain of Russia and Germany

of 1920. We have decades of experience with legal trade union work, we have decades of experience with mass access to the school system. None of these conditions prevailed in Germany and Russia of the time. We will have to develop our own strategies and tactics in our own quite different conditions.

To the Masses is not a text book – but it is a magnificent history book. It is a resource to use as we try to properly understand the momentous upheavals which shook empires after the catastrophe of the so-called "Great War". Buy this book. The long labours of John Riddell, Mike Taber and their collaborators have given us a real resource to allow us to properly assess the lessons from a revolution that next year will be 100 years old. The publishing efforts of Haymarket Press (Riddell 2016) mean that it is accessible at a reasonable price. It is a resource that will be used for decades.

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