

The Marxist
Volume: 04, No. 2
April-June, 1986

Revolutionary Traditions of May Day

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THE CENTENTARY OF MAY DAY WILL BE CELEBRATED all over the world and tributes will be paid to the memories of the Chicago martyrs this year. This heroic struggle for an 8-hour day will be recalled and its subsequent history recapitulated.

It is, however, no secret that the working class did not march as a single army united in ideology and practice soon after internationalisation of the May Day. It got divided into two camps; its movement got divided into two trends, the revolutionary and the reformist.

The revolutionary trend was represented by Marxism, the heritage given by Marx and Engels and later on enriched by Lenin. This trend determined the purpose and aims of May Day when through the Socialist International it decided to internationalise the observance of May Day. For it, the Day became the reassertion and declaration of the general line of the revolutionary movement of the working class and became an occasion to review the class struggle waged in accordance with this line. The other trend gradually reduced May Day observance to the declaration of a few economic demands without any call for revolution or international unity. This was really its general line for the working class movement, a line of rejection of revolution, of parliamentary illusions and surrendering international unity before bourgeois chauvinism.

The two lines produced two different results. The Marxist – Leninists were able to organise successful socialist revolutions in one third of the world; the reformists remained imprisoned under the rule of capital.

The Chicago massacre was not the first massacre of the workers. In

fact, far bigger massacres with hundreds of workers killed the taken place decades before May 1886. The Chicago gathering was not the first gathering to raise the question of reduction of working hours. In fact for three decades the working class of Great Britain had waged a battle for reduction of working hours and had succeeded in reducing them to the ten hours.

And in Europe the aims and objects of working class struggle had gone far beyond achievement of partial demands. The working class had, long before, raised the question of political power and organised insurrection to attain it. Fifteen years before Chicago, the French workers were successful in organising the first state of the working class and they had to pay the price for it in hundreds killed and thousands deported outside the country. The revolutionary content given to May Day was determined by the grand achievement preceding the American workers' struggle for an 8-hour day.

May Day is consecrated to the memory of the Chicago workers who were killed in police shootings for daring to demand an 8-hour workday. It is consecrated to the memory of their leaders who were executed by a capitalist court for leading the workers' struggle against unbridled brutal exploitation. It was later revealed that the leaders were convicted on the basis of the perjured evidence, that the main prosecution witness was bribed. Because of this, those who were sentenced to life terms had to be released before time.

One of the leaders committed suicide in jail. The others walked to the gallows with erect heads.

The hundred years since the Hay Market massacre have witnessed tremendous successes for the working class movement. A class whose leaders were executed for demanding an 8-hour workday under capitalism has now vanquished capitalism over one third of the world and established socialism over it. The red flag of the working class waves proudly over the socialist countries inspiring confidence in the rest of the working class about its ultimate victory. The working class successes have also given a fatal blow to the old colonial system under which countries like India and other countries of Asia and Africa stood enchained by foreign rulers. Thanks to these achievements of the international working class movement these countries are breathing the air of freedom.

These victories were achieved at the cost of tremendous sacrifices on the part of the working class, its organisations and its political parties. They were invariably led by communist parties wedded to Marxism – Leninism. They demanded tremendous sacrifice on the part of individual workers. Hundreds had to undergo the torture of capitalist prisons. Thousands were shot dead by fascists in German concentration camps and hundreds again had to face the jails and the gallows of imperialist rulers in the national liberation struggle; and millions from the Soviet working class and the people had to sacrifice their lives in the anti-fascist war. It is on the basis of this tremendous flow of blood that the world could see the emergence of the socialist camp and its growing strength.

Though the Chicago demonstration started on the question of 8-hour working day, the international tradition of May Day went far beyond demands. It combined the fight for partial demands, having revolutionary significance, with the call for ending the capitalist order and capture of political power by the working class and a call for international unity of the working class. Those who abided by these components of May Day tradition were able to organise successful revolution. Those who confined their practice, and the observance of May Day to immediate demands only, landed themselves into reformist and revisionist deviations. The reformist parties proved totally incapable of bringing about a social transformation and acted only as some kind of opposition within the framework of the capitalist system.

PREDECESSORS OF MAY DAY

The internationalisation of May Day and its revolutionary content were determined by the predecessors of May Day, the great events and battles waged by the working class under the influence of its revolutionary ideology.

By May 1886, when the Chicago firing took place. Marx was no longer alive. But his teachings had seized the working class movement, which was more and more rallying round the banner of Marxism. The great landmarks of the working class movement preceding internationalisation of May Day were the *Communist Manifesto of 1848*, the June insurrection of Paris workers (1848), the founding of the First International under the guidance of the Marx and the rise of the Paris commune, the first state of the working class of 1871.

The *Manifesto*, which was published during the days of the February revolutions in France in 1848, was the manifesto of the Communist League, an association of international workers. It expressed the revolutionary ideology of the working class, which was to inspire it on future occasions. International cooperation of workers had already begun

The *Manifesto* said that of all the classes that stand face to face with the bourgeoisie today, the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class. All previous historical movements were movements of minorities or in the interest of minorities; the proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of this immense majority.

In depicting the most general phases of the development of the proletariat, it stressed the more or less veiled civil war raging within the existing society, up to the point where that war breaks out into open revolution and when the violent overthrow of the bourgeoisie lays the foundation of the state of the proletariat.

The first step in the revolution of the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of the ruling class, to win the battle for democracy. The proletariat will use its struggle for supremacy to wrest, by degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the state, i.e., of the proletariat organised as the ruling class and to increase the total of productive forces as rapidly as possible.

The *Manifesto* ended with the declaration, "The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their aims can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a communist's revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have the world to win. Working men of all countries, unite."

This is a consciousness of the revolutionary overthrow of capital far ahead of consciousness for partial demands. It was a period when the working class movement was just beginning to be self-conscious.

The ideology was yet to reach and win a large section, to become a material force. But the march of history could not wait. The June revolution of Paris workers (June 1848) was an attempt at revolution of a working class, which had as yet no clear ideas of its aims and objectives. The workers did not content themselves with demonstration and protests as in Chicago. They took up arms and waged a heroic battle. Hundreds were killed and thousands were imprisoned. Writing about the June revolution Marx said,

“The workers of Paris were overwhelmed by superior strength, but they were not subdued. They have been defeated but their enemies are vanquished. The momentary triumph of brute force has been purchased with the destruction of all the delusions and illusions of the February revolution, the dissolution of the entire modern Republican Party and the division of the French nation into two nations, a nation of owners and a nation of the workers. The tricolour republic now displays only one colour, the colour of the defeated, and the colour of blood. It has become a red republic.

“None of the numerous revolutions of the French bourgeoisie since 1789 assailed the existing order for they retained the class rule, the slavery of the workers, the bourgeois order, even though the political form of this rule and this slavery changed frequently. The June uprising did assail this order. Woe to the June uprising.”

Marx, describing the situation after the defeat of the revolution and speaking in defence of the proletarians wrote. “But the plebeians are tormented by hunger, abused by the press, forsaken by the doctors, called thieves, incendiaries and galley slaves by respectabilities; their wives and children are plunged into greater misery and the best of those who have survived are sent overseas. It is the right and privilege of the democratic press to place laurels on their clouded threatening brow.”

FIRST INTERNATIONAL

The founding of the Workingmen’s International Association was an outstanding event. It proved by its deeds to be a world-shaking event. The International Workingmen’s Association later on came to be known as the First International. It was formed in September 1864. The developments since 1848 and the character of the International were to be sent the inaugural address delivered by Karl

Marx at a public meeting. It showed that the struggle for reduction of working hour had already secured significant successes. It further showed that the international unity of the working class and capture of political power were already coming to the forefront of the working class movement. Of course with the defeat of the 1848 revolution, the working class movement had received a number of setbacks. Yet there were compensating factors. Marx observed in his Inaugural Address.

“And yet the period passed since the Revolutions of 1848 has not been without its compensating features ... After a 30 years’ struggle fought with most admirable perseverance, the English working class improving a momentous spilt between the landlords and the money-lords, succeeded in carrying the Ten Hours’ Bill.” This struggle had a revolutionary significance and Marx observed, “This struggle about the legal restriction of the hours of labour raged more fiercely since, apart from frightened avarice, it told indeed upon the great contest between the blind rule of the supply and demand laws which form the political economy of the middle class, and social production controlled by social foresight, which forms the political economy of the working class. Hence the Ten Hours’ Bill was not only a great practical success; it was the victory of a principle; it was for the first time that in broad daylight the political economy of the middle class succumbed to the political economy of the working class.”

It was a victory of struggle for partial demands and it was a political victory defeating the supply and demand logic and replacing it with the logic of social production.

But the Inaugural Address went beyond partial struggles and expressed the political will of the International Workers’ Association. The Address says. “To conquer political power has, therefore, become a great duty of the working classes. They seem to have comprehended this, for in England, Germany, Italy and France, there have been place simultaneous revivals and simultaneous efforts are being made at political reorganisation of the workmen’s party.”

This is followed by a call for international unity, “One element of success they possess-numbers; but numbers weigh only in balance, if united by combination and led by knowledge. Past experience has shown how disregard of the bond of brotherhood which ought to exist between workers of different countries, and incite them to

stand firmly by each other in all their struggle for emancipation will be chastised by common discomfiture of their incoherent efforts. This though prompted the workmen of different countries assembled on September 28, 1864 in public meeting at St. Martin's Hall, London, to found the International Association."

Stressing on the necessity to build international unity, the inaugural Address calls upon the workers of all countries to exercise vigilance on the foreign policy of their governments and to fight on all occasions, the policies which set the workers of one country to fight against through war and other conflicts. The Inaugural Address says.

"If the emancipation of the working class requires their fraternal concurrence, how are they to fulfil that great mission with a foreign policy in pursuit of criminal designs, playing upon national prejudices, and squandering in piratical wars the people's blood and treasure?" He observed that events have "taught the working classes the duty to master themselves the mysteries of international politics; to watch the diplomatic acts of their respective governments; to counteract them, if necessary, by all means in their power; when unable to prevent to combine in simultaneous denunciations, and to vindicate the simple laws of morals and justice, which ought to govern the relations of private individuals, as the rules paramount of the intercourse of nations.

"To fight for such a foreign policy forms part of the general struggle for the emancipation of the working classes.

"Proletariats of all countries, Unite."

Between 1864 and 1871 rapid developments took place in Europe and by 1871 Europe saw the Franco-German war. As a result of the war, the world saw the rise of the first working class state, the Paris Commune.

The Franco-German was a reactionary war launched against Germany by the French Government allied with Tsarist Russia. Success for the French would have meant success for European reaction, headed by Tsarist Russia and a setback to the working class movement. Though the rulers of Germany no doubt were reactionary,

it was necessary to prevent the victory of the French and its ally, the Tsar, against the people of Europe.

Marx, therefore, advised the German working class to fight the French attack, while warning them that own ruling class may use war for its won reactionary class purposes. The German working class, to prevent such a development announced its opposition to the annexation of the French provinces of Alsace-Lorraine and assured the working class of France that it would continue to fight against the designs of its ruling class.

Under the inspiration of the International, Paris members published their manifesto to the workmen of all nations on the question of war. It said.

“Once more, on the pretext of the European equilibrium, for national honour, the peace of the world is menaced by political ambitions. French, German and Spanish workmen, let our voices unite in one cry of reprobation against war. War for a question of preponderance of a dynasty can, in the eyes of workmen, be nothing but a criminal absurdity. In answer to the war-like proclamations of those who exempt themselves from the impost of blood and find in public misfortune a source of fresh speculations we protest. We who want peace, labour and liberty. Brothers of Germany, our division would only result in the complete triumph of despotism on both sides of the Rhine. Workmen of all countries, whatever may for the present become of our common efforts, we, know of no frontiers, we send you a pledge of indissoluble solidarity, the good wishes and salutations of the workmen of France.”

The voice of the French workmen received a warm response from Germany. A mass meeting held on 16 July, said, “We are enemies of all wars, but above all of dynastic wars. With deep sorrow and grief, forced to undergo a defensive war as an inevitable event, but we call, at the same time, upon the whole German working class to render the recurrence of such as immense social misfortune by vindicating for the people themselves the power to decide on peace and war and making them masters of their own destinies.”

In another meeting a resolution was passed to the following effect:

“In the name of German democracy, and specially of the workmen forming the Democratic Socialist Party we declare the present war to be exclusively dynastic.

“We are happy to grasp the fraternal hand stretched out to us by the workmen of France. Mindful of the watchword of the International Association, “Proletarians of all countries, Unite”, we shall never forget that the workmen of all countries are our friends and despots of all countries our enemies.”

Such was the spirit proletarian internationalism inspiring the working class under the guidance of the First International.

PARIS COMMUNE

Development arising out of the war led to the insurrection of Paris workers and the emergence of the first working class state.

Marx wrote about the Commune,

“The Commune was thus a true representative of all the healthy elements of French society, and therefore, a truly national government, it was at the same time, as a workmen’s government, the bold champion of the emancipation of labour, emphatically international. Within sight of the Prussian army that had annexed Germany, two French provinces, the Commune annexed to France, the working people all over the world. The Commune admitted all foreigners to the honour of dying for an immortal cause. The Commune made a German workman its Minister of Labour.”

The rise of the first working class state in the midst of capitalist Europe, the revolutionary measures it took to help forward the emancipation of the working class, the blow it gave to the bureaucratic apparatus of the capitalist states and its measures like electing public officials through common vote sent a wave of panic and fear in the capitalist class of all countries and every effort was made to defeat this heroic battle of the Parisian workers. The inevitable result of the combination of all reactionary forces was the defeat of the Commune followed by massacre. Engels wrote.

“It was only after eight days ‘fighting when the last defenders of the Commune succumbed and then the massacre of defenceless men, women and children which had been raging all through the week on an increasing scale, reached its zenith. The breach-loaders could no longer kill fast enough; the vanquished were shot down in hundreds. The Wall of the federals where the final mass murder was consummated it still standing today, a mute but eloquent testimony to the frenzy of which the ruling class is capable as soon as the working class dares to stand up for its rights. When slaughter of them all proved to be impossible, came the mass arrests, the shooting of victims arbitrarily selected from the prisoners’ ranks removal of the rest to the great camps where they waited trial by court-martials.”

Never before had the working class movement seen such a massacre. Here again, there is a massacre following civil war, a class war, which revealed the blood – thirsty vengeance of the entire capitalist class. Events of 1871 showed how the workers were fulfilling their historic task of creating a new state directly responsible to the people, a state essentially different, from the capitalist state to secure the emancipation of the entire society from exploitation.

These were the great predecessors of the May Day movement and they invested May Day observance with the rich revolutionary content, which went far beyond the demand for an 8-hour day and other partial demands. It is this tradition that laid down that May Day observance should not only put forward certain important partial demands but also announce the determination of working class to end the capitalist system through a revolution and product the international unity of the working class by opposing all instruments of defeating its unity.

REVOLUTIONARY CONTENT

The Socialist International, later on known as the Second International, founded in 1889, took the initiative to internationalise May Day giving it a revolutionary class content. This was no accident because the Socialist International represented the political parties of the European working class who had grown and were nurtured in the spirit of revolutionary Marxism. They had grown under the influence of the 1848 revolution and the great happenings of the Paris Commune. And besides, in the foundation of the international,

Fredrick Engels played a great role and was the guiding spirit in directing its policies and outlook in the beginning. Therefore, the May Day call of the Socialist International uniting the 8-hour day struggle of Chicago workers with the revolutionary traditions of the European workers became a tremendous international success setting the movement on correct revolutionary lines.

Under its guidance, May Day became a day of assertion of the three great components of the current revolutionary struggle of the working class. They consisted of raising certain partial demands of the workers having revolutionary significance; raising the demands for capture of political power through revolution; and protection of international unity at all costs by opposing militarism and wars.

It is no accident that only organisations and parties that carried forward this heritage of the international revolutionary movement and never forgot their revolutionary task while determinedly carrying forward their battles for partial demands succeeded in organising socialist revolutions. Such were the Marxist- Leninist parties who never forgot the three components and rejected all class collaborationist policies. There is no instance of a non-Marxist party organising any revolution or bringing about any social transformation.

The fact is that May Day which was originally to rally support for 8-hours' work, was now invested with the content of the general line of the revolutionary working class movement. It was therefore, inevitable that those who stuck to the line in conducting the struggle of the working class should be successful in organising socialist revolution while those who departed from the line should land themselves into the morass of reformism. The Marxist-Leninist parties remained at the head of the socialist revolution transforming one third of the world; reformist socialist democratic parties became prisoners of the capitalist order unable to break through the prison with their illusions about peaceful and parliamentary path to socialism.

Commenting on the revolutionary significance of May Day Lenin said in 1900, "the demand for an 8-hour day, however, is the demand of the whole proletariat presented not to individual employers, but to the state authorities as the representative of the entire present day social and political system, to the capitalist class as a whole, the

owners of all the means of production. The demand of an 8-hour day has assumed a special significance. It is a declaration of solidarity with the international socialist movement. We need to make the workers understand this so that they do not reduce railway tickets or the dismissal of a watchman.

“Throughout the year, the workers, first in one place and then another continuously present a variety of partial demands to their employers and fight for their achievement. In assisting the workers in this struggle socialists must always explain its connection with the proletarian struggle for its emancipation in all countries. And the first of May must be the day on which the workers solemnly declare that they realise the connection and resolutely join in the struggle.”

Combining the urgent economic demands having revolutionary significance with the general expression of international solidarity and desire for socialism was not enough. To be able to reach the goal of socialism, it was necessary that the working class of each country address itself to the concrete problem of revolution facing it. Lenin said in 1902 in his letter to the Northern League.

“It should have been added that in our country May Day also becomes a demonstration against the autocracy, a demand for political liberty. Pointing to the international significance of the holiday is not enough. It must also be linked with the struggle for the most vital national political demands.”

In Lenin’s days, the reformist tried to undermine the significance of the revolutionary character of May Day and decided to bring it in line with their reformist policies. This was the phenomenon in all European socialist democratic parties except the Russian and some other parties. Lenin noted this development in the German party in the year 1905. In his article, *Jena Congress of German Socialist Democratic Workers Party*, he wrote,

“Another question that came up for discussion in Jena, prior to the question of political strike is also highly instructive for Russia. This was the question of May Day celebration or to be more exact (to take the gist of the matter and not the item that gave rise to the discussion), the question or relationship of the trade union movement with the Social Democratic Party.

“Proletary has spoken times about the profound impression made on German Socialist Democrats and not only on them alone, by the Cologne Trade Union Congress. It became more than evident at this Congress that even in Germany, where the tradition of Marxism and its influence are strongest, anti-socialist tendencies towards “pure trade unionism” of the British i.e., absolutely bourgeois type, are developing in the trade unions, mark you, social democratic trade unions. That is why from the question of May Day demonstration in its literal sense, there inevitably arose at the Jena Congress the question of trade unionism and social democracy, the question of economism to speak in the terms of the trends within the Russian Socialist Democratic movement.”

NARROW TRADE UNIONISM

This had gone so far that, for instance, Bringmann, the representative of the Carpenters’ Union had uttered and published sentiments like the following: “A strike on May Day is like a foreign body in the human body. In the given circumstances the trade unions are the sole means for symptoms of the disease, as Fischer aptly termed them, are supplemented by a number of other. In Germany as in Russia and indeed everywhere, a narrow trade unionism or economism is linking up with opportunism (revisionism).

Within a few years this trend began to dominate the social democratic parties and day by day basic tenets of Marxism were directly or indirectly given up leading to repudiation of the entire revolutionary line of the working class movement.

Nowhere was the collapse so complete and scandalous as on the question of international unity of the working class. Day by day, the social democratic parties, in matters of foreign policy, began to adopt the same stand as that of their government when capitalism had already entered the stage of imperialism and the policy of the advanced capitalist countries was nothing but a policy of colonial conquest and domination.

ON THE QUESTION OF WAR

The acid test of internationalism came on the question of the

developing prospect of war between capitalist countries. Since the days of the First International, the working class movement was taught to take a class position towards all wars, opposing those which were reactionary and whose aim was domination of other nations and supporting wars of national liberation and wars which helped forward the progress of social advance. The Marxist position on war was not a pacifist position but was determined by the interests of the advance of socialism and emancipation of mankind from exploitation. It, therefore, sometimes entailed support of one party in the war while opposing its opponent. It sometimes demanded that every effort be made to prevent a war where consequences would definitely harm social development and working class struggle for establishing a socialist system. On all occasions, the question of war and peace was to be decided on the basis of which class is fighting whom, which combination is helpful to the revolutionary working class to achieve its objectives.

As has been pointed out earlier, during the Franco-German war in 1870, Marx and Engels called upon the German working class to defend their country against French attack while they called upon the French workers to oppose the war launched by their government. The reason for this differentiation was that France was in alliance with Tsarist Russia and the victory of the two would have meant the victory of the reactionary forces in Europe, German defeat would have meant further obstacles to the modern development of Germany and many other countries thereby hampering the struggle for socialism. At the same time the German and French workers were called upon to fraternise with each other and the German workers openly declared that they would not allow annexation of Alsace and Lorraine to Germany. Marx showed that internationalism of the working class cannot be effective unless it has a correct and class attitude towards conflicts between nations.

At the end of the 1880s and the beginning of 1890s, the question of war again appeared before the working class movement of Europe. Marx and Engels had prophesied in 1870-71 that annexation of Alsace and Lorraine by the German state would lead to a new war, a war that would inevitably harm Europe. Engels saw the approaching war and followed the developments with deep concern. He urged the representatives of the Second International, and especially the leaders of the German and French labour movement to deal with the dangerous situation by mutual exchange of ideas. He called up on them to develop a working class alternative to the warmongering policy of the ruling classes.

He and Marx had in 1848 openly called for a revolutionary people's war against Tsarist Russia as the main source of European reaction. In the 1850s and 1860s they firmly held to this concept. Now, however, Engels was of the firm opinion that a world war would indeed shake the power of the ruling classes but would also retard the forward march of the workers' movement by stirring up feelings of nationalism and chauvinism. Engels drew the conclusion that the socialist movement and the people in general urgently needed peace for their further development; under peaceful conditions the organised working class could best prepare itself for the struggle to conquer political power. The struggle for peace thus become a permanent and inseparable part of their struggle for socialism.

To fight against the war danger Engels wrote an alternative programme for foreign policy. This was supplemented by an alternative programme for domestic policies at the centre of which stood the destruction of the Prussian and German military state. It concentrated on bringing about the end of the dangerous expansionist initiative by Germany for universal disarmament, establishment of peaceful relations with the neighbouring peoples on the basis of mutual equality, especially the re-establishment of Poland and guarding of the right of self-determination to the people of Alsace and Lorraine; as well as the right of self-determination of the German people in all questions of foreign policy; especially with respect to war and peace. (See; *Frederick Engels: A Biography*. PPH, New Delhi).

This was perhaps for the first time that a comprehensive programme for disarmament was proposed by the working class. But putting for disarmament and expression of opposition to war did not stop the ruling class from going further ahead with arms expansion. Engels, therefore, took the situation into consideration and gave advice on what the working class should do if war broke out. The main consideration on the basis of which Engels defined the attitude of the French and German working class to a European war was the overall interest of the international workers' movement. It was true he wrote, that the French republic represented the revolution as against official Germany that is to say only the bourgeois revolution, but in any event the revolution; but behind official Germany stood socialist Germany, the party to which the future, the near future belonged. "As soon as the party comes to power, it cannot exercise it or retain it without making amends for the injuries which its predecessors in

office committed against other nations. It will prepare the re-establishment of Poland, so meanly betrayed today by the French bourgeoisie, it will make it possible for North Schlesvig and Alsace-Lorraine to decide freely on their political future. All these questions thus can be easily settled in the near future only on condition that Germany be left to itself.”

On the other hand the ruling classes in Germany as well as in France and Russia, had a completely opposite aim in a possible war, namely the oppression of the only party, which is “the enemy for all three of them, the revolutionary workers’ party. For that reason the German Socialists in the interests of the European revolution were bound to defend all conquered positions, to capitulate as little before the external enemy as before the internal enemy. Since official Germany through its home policy unworthy of a great nation, had drawn the contempt of all bourgeois liberal countries upon itself and through its foreign policy the distrust and the hatred of the neighbouring nations. Engels was of the opinion that in a possible war at the beginning of the 1890s German socialism would unquestionably personify the proletarian revolution as against French-Russian attack. In that case, the German workers’ party would have to force through the application of strict revolutionary rules. Engels hoped that the German proletariat of the day were not unworthy of the French *sans culottes* of a hundred years ago.

This was a time when Marxism dominated the thought of the social democratic parties and, therefore, there was not much difficulty in securing common understanding on the question of war. Engels felt very happy when the French Party completely agreed with his line of thinking. Lafargue the French leader wrote,

“Our friends have not the least reason to object to it; they will even find that it has arrived at precisely the right moment, and that it is the clearest and the most intelligent presentation of the current situation and that it is most important at the present moment to speak the truth.”

In the earlier years of the Socialist International, opposition to war was reiterated. When the Paris congress met, the danger of war was growing in Europe. The Paris congress, therefore, adopted a resolution for disbanding standing armies, calling for the arming of the entire people. This resolution exposed the direct connection

between wars and capitalism and underlined that the worldwide triumph of socialism was the best guarantee that there would be no war.

At its next Congress in Brussels in 1890, the Socialist International called upon the workers to observe May First to demand the 8-hour day and to ensure peace among the nations. The call of the Second International to raise opposition to war and demand peace among nations on May Day was on the tradition of internationalism set by the First International.

The Socialist International formed under the guidance of Engels infused May Day observance with the tradition of opposition to war and upholding the international unity of the working class.

STRUGGLE AGAINST REFORMISM

The tradition continued to inspire May Day observance year after year. It was a period when proletarian parties inspired by Marxism were spreading the Europe, spreading the message of revolution capture of power and opposition to the war plans of the militarists. The period saw the rise and spread of Marxism to Russia and the rise of the Bolshevik party led by Lenin, the proletarian party of a new type suited to discharge the task of organising the imminent proletarian socialist revolution.

But as Lenin pointed out, the Socialist International and its parties grew in breadth, at the cost of temporary strengthening of opportunism. The beginning of this opportunism was seen at the Jena Congress of the German party and noted by Lenin. But the disease began to affect all social democratic parties leading to an intense inner-party struggle between the revolutionary and opportunist lines. The revolutionary line triumphed in Russia and the Bolshevik party was able to successfully lead the revolutionary struggle for socialism.

The opportunist trend arose out of the period of capitalist expansion, its development into imperialism. It created illusions about peaceful development to socialism, redundancy of class struggle.

The labour aristocracy, which had developed in some of the European countries nourished by colonial loot, nurtured this line of opportunism. Imperialist pressure and the rise of nationalist tendencies in the social democratic parties obstructed efforts to strengthen international solidarity and expand the cooperation of the proletariat of different countries.

Lenin noted that “Throughout the existence of the Second International a struggle was raised in all the social democratic parties, between the revolutionary and opportunist wings.”

Early 20th century development showed that the revolutionary wings was the real force behind many decisions of the International. Do what they could; the opportunists could not succeed in having their resolutions adopted at socialist conferences and International Congresses. All they could do was to obstruct and sabotage the implementation of these decisions. As a result most of the social democratic parties did not follow up the resolutions adopted in the conferences especially those up the struggle against war.

August 1914 saw the outbreak of the first imperialist war. Writing in the autumn of 1914, Lenin characterised the war as follows: “Seizure of territory and subjugation of other nations, the running of competing nations and plunder of their wealth, distracting the attention of the working masses from the internal political crisis in Russia, Germany, Britain and other countries, disunity and nationalist stultification of workers, and the extermination of their vanguard so as to weaken the revolutionary movement of the proletariat— these comprise the sole actual content, importance and significance of the present war.”

At this critical moment the right wing social democrats and the centrists openly betrayed the interests of the working class and the revolution. Instead of fighting for the overthrow of capitalism, for converting the imperialist war into civil war, as Lenin advised, the opportunists followed the bourgeoisie of their countries and declared that the predatory imperialist war waged by their governments was defensive in character, a war to save civilisation and the gains of the working class. They called upon the workers to forge national unity, that is, to untie with their predatory bourgeoisie to massacre the working class of other countries.

Some activists of the Second International now crowned their opportunism with joining the imperialist governments and propagating a policy of civic peace, that is class collaboration. It helped the warring governments to repress the anti-war activities of the working class. Most social democratic members of parliament approved war appropriations.

This was complete repudiation of internationalism, the international tradition of May Day, of opposition to war and protection of the international unity of the working class.

The left wing, the revolutionary wing in the social democratic parties in all countries opposed this betrayal. They voiced their protest against the war. They were sent to jail by the imperialist rulers. But the revolutionary wing was in a minority and could not prevent the betrayal notwithstanding its relentless fight against opportunism and repudiation of internationalism.

Only in Russia, under the leadership of Lenin could the Bolshevik party succeed in carrying out its revolutionary task in the fight against war and the struggle for revolution.

In Russia, the struggle against war started in earnest from the beginning. Barricades were erected in St. Petersburg on July 18, the day the war was declared. On that day 27,000 people went on strike in the capital. Strikes broke out in Moscow also. Mass anti-war demonstrations took place in a number of cities. Activities by workers, peasants and draftees spread to several industrial centres. In the two weeks following the declaration of war five hundred and five draftees and 106 officials were wounded or killed in 27 gubernias. Bolshevik members of the DUMA uncompromisingly opposed the war. They sponsored an anti-war declaration and were the first to refuse to vote to approve military appropriations. They were tried and exiled.

Such was the contrast between the two lines, the one which led to the victory of the revolution and other which supported the imperialist war and led to the betrayal of the revolution.

No wonder a number of post-war revolutions in European countries

including Germany were betrayed by the reformists and were suppressed by the ruling party.

The revolutionary achievements of the period could not have been possible without a relentless struggle against opportunism and the class collaborationist line. The defence of internationalism could not have been possible without an inner struggle against revisionism.

The success of the Russian revolution sharpened the struggle within the reformist and revolutionary lines in the labour movement between the internationalist and nationalist chauvinist lines and led to an open split. The formation of the Communist International under the guidance of Lenin and the formation of Communist Parties underlined that the two trends could no longer remain in one organisation. They must collide with each other on important an issue of the revolutionary movement was to march forward.

The Communist International and the Communist Parties now represented the revolutionary and international traditions of May Day of the earlier years and they remained true to them on all critical occasions. The new international had no place for those who were not specifically committed to fight the domination of their country over the colonies. There could not be any internationalism if it did not include the fight against colonial domination. Lenin said

“The social revolution can come only in the form of an epoch in which are combined civil war by the proletariat in the advanced countries and a whole series of democratic and revolutionary movements, including the national revolutionary movement in the underdeveloped, backward and oppressed nations.”

This completely demarcated the Communists from the reformists. Emphasising the same point Lenin said at the Second Congress of the Second International “The revolutionary movement in the advanced countries would actually be sheer fraud of in their struggle against capital the workers of Europe and America were not closely and completely united with the hundreds of hundreds of millions of colonial slaves who are oppressed by capital.”

The Communist International and the Communist parties became the

custodian of the international revolutionary traditions and had to carry forward the heritage in opposition to the social democratic and reformist parties who continued to retain their mass base after the defeat of post-war revolution in Europe. It was a hard struggle to maintain the movement on revolutionary traditions and at the same time make every effort to win over larger and larger sections of the working class who were deeply under the reformist influence.

The working class had to pay a heavy price for the influence of the reformist ideology on its movement. The reformists weakened and disrupted the fight against fascism refusing to form a joint front with the communists in the struggle against fascism. The Communist party making every effort to unite the entire working class in the struggle against fascism was met with resistance by the reformists.

Only in a few countries did the reformists opt for a wide popular front to stem the tide of fascist counter-revolution. Fascist counter-revolution was facilitated in Germany and some other countries because of the reformist disruption.

Above all, in foreign policy outlook the reformists again repudiated all international responsibilities. They refused to recognise the validity of the socialist revolution in Russia to consider it as the biggest gain of the working class movement and were not prepared to fight the war conspiracies of their governments against the socialist state. On the other hand they maligned the working class state as based on denial of democracy and after the rise of the fascist state in Germany, they began to describe both as totalitarian states, wiping out the difference between the revolutionary class state of the working class and the counter-revolutionary class state of the fascist bourgeoisie.

In the year between the two wars they generally helped the policy of their governments, the Anglo-French governments, to direct the German offensive against the USSR and refused to support the Soviet call for peace and collective security.

This total repudiation of internationalism landed their countries in disaster and defeat at the hands of Hitler. Only when after the debacle, their governments were forced to side with the Soviet Union did these worthies of reformism change their line and agree to stand

together with the socialist state in the common struggle against Hitler.

Once again, the peoples of the world and the working class had to pay an immense price for this treacherous class collaboration. It was mainly the heroism of the Soviet working class, of the Soviet people and their sacrifices that changed the fate of the war and enabled the enslaved nations of Europe to regain their freedom.

In this period Communist parties in their countries played a heroic role fighting fascism, struggling against war and protecting the revolutionary tradition of May Day.

It was their heroic anti-fascist struggle, their stubborn internationalism that enabled a number of East European countries to overthrow the old order and establish socialism after the defeat of Hitler's forces by the Red Army.

The Communist parties continued to carry forward the revolutionary tradition after the anti-fascist victory fighting the US plans of world domination and coming forward as partisans of the socialist camp which now extends over one third of the world with the victory of great Chinese revolution. The 1957 meeting of the Communist parties declared US imperialism to be the main enemy of all people and the leader of world reaction.

But the reformist wing continued its old mistaken outlook of aligning behind its government and refusing to recognise the socialist camp as the mighty victory of the world working class. Year by year it fell into the imperialist grasp supporting the manoeuvres of its government against the socialist camp and refusing to fight against the nuclear blackmail by US imperialists. Once again proletarian internationalism was repudiated in the interest of class collaboration.

The Communist movement had to carry forward the task of defending international unity, supporting the national liberation struggle and fighting imperialist machinations against the socialist camp. This it did valiantly and in the principled manner for a number of years.

But unfortunately, certain segments of the Communist movement began to be affected by revisionist illusions and sectarian understanding which gradually weakened their international perception and ties. Illusions about peaceful and parliamentary transition to socialism, disavowing some of the basic propositions of Marxism-Leninism, like the dictatorship of the proletariat led to an erosion of the concept of proletarian internationalism. In the final analysis revisionism leads to a narrow national outlook diverting the working class from its international responsibility. Sectarianism also achieved the same results. Its sectarian revolutionary phrases landed it in repudiating internationalism.

So striking was this deviation in certain segments that in the Berlin Conference of Communist Parties (1978), the late Comrade Brezhnev had to take note of it and say "WE should like to lay special emphasis on the concept of proletarian internationalism in our times. It is one of the main principles of Marxism-Leninism. Unfortunately, some have begun to interpret it in such a way that, in fact, little is left of internationalism. In their opinion the internationalism substantiated and promoted by Marx and Lenin is outmoded, but as we see, to enounce international proletarianism is to deprive the Communist party and the working class movement in general of mighty and trusty weapon. It would work in favour of the class enemy who, by the way, actively coordinates anti-Communist activities on an international scale."

Non-partisanship for the socialist camp- the historic achievement of Marxism-Leninism – equating the NATO and Warsaw alliances, the talk about two super powers, eliminating the class distinction between a socialist and imperialist state, are some of the characteristics of those who question the validity of proletarian internationalism. This also lead to total underestimation of the role of the socialist camp and the Soviet Union in the struggle for peace and lack of whole-hearted support to the concrete and vital proposals for peace made by the USSR. It also results in failure to expose the aggressive war policy of US imperialism.

But the major part of the Communist movement continued to remain loyal to the revolutionary traditions and fights against these deviations. It once more proves that without a serious inner struggle against reformist trends the victory of the world working class cannot be ensured.

SOCIALISM FOR PEACE

The maintenance of international peace has become the most urgent question facing world humanity. The danger of nuclear war being organised by the USA hangs over the world and the entire world is threatened with destruction. The two social systems facing each other have directly contradictory aims and objects. The imperialist system considers war as an instrument to achieve its objective of domination. The socialist system demands peace for the world so that each nation is free to decide its own future without coercion and massacre of millions of people in war.

The fight of the international working class for peace is now merging with the world peoples' struggle for survival and for a prosperous future free from poverty and misery. It is not accidental that the Soviet proposals for peace and reduction of nuclear and other arms draw warm response from millions all over the world. Gorbachev's latest proposals for step-by-step reduction of arms which includes unilateral withdrawal of medium distance missiles by the Soviets has again evoked wide response in all countries. The rejection of the many offers made by the Soviet Union the repudiation of SALT-II Agreement and all the refusal to give up Space War preparations all condemn the USA in the eyes of the people who in millions are joining the peace movement. By their actions people are distinguishing between the camp of imperialist and the camp of socialism supporting the latter's proposals in display, who now takes a neutral position between the camp of war and the camp of peace in the name of neutrality in the conflict between the two 'Super Powers' reveal a consciousness more backward than that of ordinary people.

Never before was the fight of the working class for peace so clearly seen and understood as identical with the interests of all nations and all peoples. That is why given complete working class unity the war-mangers can be defeated.

Each contingent of the world working class must be in the forefront of the struggle in keeping the revolutionary traditions of May Day. In India the working class is yet to realise its responsibility and throw its full weight in the struggle against war. The government of India's policy of non-alignment, its stand against war and in defence of peace, its proposals in cooperation with other non-aligned governments to slow down the arms race, constitute great assets for the struggle in defence of peace in India. Unfortunately the working

class movement has failed to make use of this situation to embark upon a vigorous peace movement and deepen the peace appeal!

However, there are signs of change. Recently all important trade union centres of India met together in a convention to express their determination to fight war and protect peace. To carry forward this united understanding to the mass of workers, to make the Indian working class an active contingent of the world peace struggle is a responsibility of all trade unions. To discharge this task, is to remain true to the internationalist traditions of May Day.