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AFRICAN NATIONAL CONGRESS
(SOUTH AFRICA)

LECTURE 4

4. THE COMMUNIST MANIFESTO

4.0 A CALL TO REVOLUTION

The Communist League, an underground workers' party, asked Marx and Engels to write its programme. This appeared in 1848 as the MANIFESTO OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY.

It remains "the most concise and the most important single document of Marxism". It has been called the 'death certificate of capitalism and the 'birth certificate' of scientific socialism. The Communist International's programme of 1928 restated the Manifesto in a form suited to the imperialist stage of capitalism. Though it was written 130 years ago, succeeding generations of revolutionaries have found in the Manifesto a constant source of inspiration, a storehouse of knowledge and a guide to action.

1848 was a year of misfired bourgeois revolutions in France, Germany, Austria and Italy. The Manifesto appeared a few weeks before the February Revolution in France when the workers of Paris forced the bourgeoisie to declare a democratic republic.

Marx and Engel, when writing the Manifesto, sensed the gathering storm. When it broke, they had no doubt "that the great decisive struggle had broken out, that it would have to be fought out in a single, long and changeful period of revolution, but that it could only end with the final victory of the proletariat".

This mood of optimism, which fires all great revolutionary movements, sets the tone of the Manifesto. It provides a materialist explanation of the French bourgeois revolution of 1789 and applies the same analysis to the coming proletarian revolution. The conviction that the overthrow of capitalism is close at hand appears throughout, as in the following passages:

"The weapons with which the bourgeoisie felled feudalism to the ground are now turned against the bourgeoisie itself. But not only has the bourgeoisie forged the weapons that bring death to itself; it has also called into existence the men who are to wield these weapons - the modern working class - the proletarians.

The development of modern industry cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. That the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable. They have a world to win.

Workingmen of all countries, unite!"

Nearly 50 years later, in 1895, Engels explained why this forecast had not been fulfilled. "History has proved us, and all who thought like us, wrong". Capitalism had still a long way to go before creating the conditions necessary for the proletarian revolution. Another 20 years passed. The workers and peasants of Tsarist Russia made their revolution in 1917, proclaimed the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics, and proved the correctness of the Communist Manifesto.

4.1 A WORLD VIEW

France's revolutions and wars had dominated Europe since the great bourgeois revolution of 1789. Wars of intervention against the revolution, the mobilisation of mass armies in defence of the revolution, the wars of conquest by that army under Napoleon, created a spirit of national consciousness - the first of its kind - that united the workers, peasants and bourgeoisie of France against the Alliance of European States, headed by capitalist England and feudal Russia, which forced Napoleon to give up his throne in 1814.

This huge upheaval in economic, political and social systems forms the background to the Manifesto. It begins with the rise of capitalism within the 'womb' of feudalism. "From the serfs of the Middle Ages sprang the chartered burghers of the earliest towns. From these burghesses the first elements of the bourgeoisie were developed".

The age of European colonialism began. Spain and Portugal, having freed themselves from 700 years of Arab domination, sent ships across the seas to explore, trade, conquer and exploit. Other Western countries - Holland, France, Britain - followed. "The discovery of America, the rounding of the Cape, opened up fresh ground for the rising bourgeoisie".

Gold, silver and precious stones, seized from the peoples of Africa, Mexico, Peru and India, poured into Europe. This huge store of wealth was used to finance improvements in the means of production. Feudal industry could not satisfy the growing wants of the new markets. A manufacturing middle class took charge of production. "Meantime the markets kept ever growing, the demand ever rising. Even manufacture no longer sufficed. Thereupon, steam and machinery revolutionise industrial production".

Capitalists wanted a free market to take advantage of the improved means of production. Feudal laws and tariffs, however, put brakes on the growing of capital. To obtain economic freedom, the capitalist class seized political power and "conquered for itself, in the modern representative State, exclusive political sway".

Industries draw their raw materials from distant countries, sell their products in every corner of the globe. "The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country... It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst, i.e. to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image".

These glimpses into the growth of world capitalism cover a period of about 400 years. Marx and Engels could do no more, within the limits of a short party programmes, than give a bare outline. Nevertheless, it shows a remarkable insight into the dynamic nature of the capitalist mode of production and its impact on pre-capitalist social formations. That survey, however, was only a prelude to their main objective - the abolition of capitalism.

4.2 CAPITALIST CRISIS

The capitalist mode of production burst through and shattered the

property relations of feudalism. Marx and Engels concluded that "a similar movement" was taking place within capitalism. The productive forces of capitalism had become "too powerful" for its property relations. "The conditions of bourgeois society are too narrow to contain the wealth created by them".

How can an economy be said to create 'too much' wealth? The aim of capitalism is to maximise profits, for which purpose it keeps on expanding the productive system. Capitalism measures its level of progress by the amount of goods and services it produces. The higher the national income per head of population the more prosperous a country is said to be.

Yet the Manifesto says that "too much means of subsistence, too much industry, too much commerce" are a major, if not fatal weakness of the system. These excesses cause economic crises "that by their periodical return put the existence of the entire bourgeois society on its trial, each time more threateningly". The crisis appears in the form of over-production. To overcome it, capitalism destroys a great part of its productive forces, conquers new markets and exploits old ones more thoroughly.

Marx was the first leading economist to understand the importance of these crises, which come and go in cycles leaving behind bankrupt firms, lower share prices and large-scale unemployment. He spent many years in tracing the causes and published the results of his labour in CAPITAL, the first volume of which appeared in 1867. Already in 1848, however, he linked the February Revolution of that year to the world trade crisis of 1847, which resulted in the closing of factories. The crisis passed, industrial prosperity reached a new high level, and the conclusion in 1850 that "A new revolution is only possible as a result of a new crisis. It is just as certain, however, as this".

4.3 THE WORKING CLASS

"The object of the Communist Manifesto", wrote Marx and Engels in 1882, "was to proclaim the inevitable impending downfall of present-day bourgeois property". In other words, the downfall of capitalist property relations based on the private ownership of the means of production and collective, socialised labour.

Capitalist crisis created the objective conditions for the downfall. The subjective force needed to bring it about is a mature, politically organised working class. The Manifesto therefore outlines the growth of the proletariat and the factors that weld it into a class, in itself and for itself.

The workers grow in number to the extent that capital expands. Modern industry destroys the little workshop of traditional craftsmen, just as it destroyed the village industries of African societies. The lower ranks of the middle class - small tradesmen, handicraft workers, peasants - become wage workers. The proletariat is recruited from all sections of the population.

"Masses of labourers, crowded into the factories, are organised like soldiers" under the command of overseers (boss boys), foremen and managers. Slaves of the capitalist, they are daily enslaved by the machine. "All are instruments of labour, more or less expensive to use, according to their age and sex".

Capital extracts surplus value, the source of profit, from the worker. The greater the degree of exploitation, the bigger the profit. Workers struggle to defend their living standards, oppose wage cuts, raise wages, reduce working hours. The struggle goes through stages as the working class matures.

"At first the contest is carried on by individual labourers, then by the work people of a factory, then by the operatives of a trade, in one locality, against the individual bourgeois who directly exploits them". The concentration of workers in mines, factories and construction works increases their strength. They feel strong and unite their forces.

Trade unions are formed, first in single factories, then in whole industries. The unions insist on solidarity, refuse to allow non-union workers to take jobs, force employers to enter into collective bargaining, and call on the workers to come out on strike in support of their demands.

The workers develop a class consciousness in the course of their struggles. They learn that their interests are opposed to the bosses' interests. They become a class in themselves.

Strikes bring them into conflict with the State, its police and courts. When African miners struck work in 1946, the police shot them down and drove them down the shafts. The government blamed the Communist Party and put its executive committee on trial for sedition. Unable to convict them, the government banned the Party under the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950.

4.4 A CLASS FOR THEMSELVES

Conflicts with employers and the State teach workers that the State is not a force 'above' all classes. It does not balance the interests of different classes but acts as an instrument of the dominant class. "The executive of the modern State", says the Manifesto, "is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie".

The economic struggles of workers therefore have a political content. "Every class struggle is a political struggle". To win the right to form trade unions and bargain collectively, workers in the older industrial countries had to overcome opposition from employers, government and the law. They went into politics and became 'a class for themselves'.

The introduction of capitalist democracy - votes for all - left unchanged the relations of production. These remain a system of private, capitalist ownership in the means of production. Working class parties, competing with capitalist parties for office (prime minister, cabinet ministers, members of parliament) often preach socialism while practising capitalism. The most that such parties can achieve is to remove the worst anti-trade union laws and to obtain social reforms such as improved housing, education, health services, pensions and unemployment benefits.

Democracy has a very different meaning in the Manifesto. It declares that democracy comes into being when workers become the ruling class. They will then use their political power "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".

4.5 A REVOLUTIONARY PARTY

There can be no revolution without a revolutionary party, no socialism without a socialist party. This is the concluding message in the Manifesto. It discusses the part played by Communists - "the most advanced and resolute section of the working class parties of every country, that section which pushes forward all others".

They have the same immediate aim as other workers' parties: "formation of the proletariat into a class, overthrow of the bourgeois supremacy, conquest of political power by the proletariat". Their theory, summed up in a single sentence, is "Abolition of private property".

There are many brands of socialism. Some are reactionary, looking backward to feudalism; some appeal to peasants and petty manufacturers; some are cloaks for a bourgeois nationalism some look for reforms that leave unchanged the property relation between capital and labour; some are Utopian: they attack capitalism, call for socialism but reject the class struggle.

Communists, however, "openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions". They "support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things". They bring to the front, as the leading question, the abolition of private, capitalist property.

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