

In Defense of Tactics

In our last issue we published an article on the use (and misuse) of the general strike slogan in the context of Britain's 1974 "Winter of Discontent." The article was excerpted from one that appeared in the 1 March 1974 *Workers Vanguard* (WV), newspaper of the Spartacist League (SL). The question of the general strike is just as important today as it was then, but the SL's attitude toward it has undergone a substantial devolution. This is evident in its attitude toward the recent series of one-day token general strikes ("Days of Action") across Ontario in opposition to the attacks of Mike Harris' Tory government.

In our propaganda we have sought to expose the half-steps taken by the union leadership, by calling for a general strike "organized and controlled by democratically-elected strike committees in every workplace coordinated through delegated regional and provincial assemblies." The SL's Canadian supporters have, by contrast, made a point of *not* calling for generalized, province-wide strike action, and have instead counterposed a call for "building a revolutionary party"—i.e., their group.

This sectarian absurdity is not confined to Canada, as we pointed out in a letter sent to the former SLers of the Internationalist Group in February 1997:

"We think that the question of the general strike is posed for French Trotskyists in the mid-1990s as well. As we explained in our article in *1917* No. 18, the situation in December 1995 seems to us to be a circumstance where revolutionaries should have made their agitational focus the call for a general strike to bring down Juppé, concretized with calls for elected strike committees in each workplace, coordinated on local, regional and national levels. This could have intersected the consciousness of the more militant union members who were attempting to push the bureaucrats in this direction, and have provided an opening for revolutionary militants to extend their political influence. Yet, while calling for extending the strikes into the private sector, the Ligue Trotskyiste de France [LTF—the SL's French affiliate] deliberately refrained from calling for a general strike, instead asserting that 'the question of power is posed.' Its central slogan was a call to build a 'new revolutionary leadership,' (i.e., the LTF)."

While the Spartacist League has yet to offer an explanation for its new policy on the general strike, *Spartacist Canada* (published by the Trotskyist League of Canada [TL]), responded to our criticism in its Fall 1997 issue. They began by contrasting the current situation in Ontario with that of Britain in 1974, when there was a "nationwide political crisis" in which the "ruling class was deeply split." But surely everyone can agree that the December 1995 strikes in Paris posed a national crisis for the French bourgeoisie? And even in Toronto, in October 1996, the capitalists decided to close down for the day rather than risk an open clash with tens of thousands of strikers.

A general strike against the Harris government would not likely lead to an immediate struggle for proletarian power. But a defensive victory won through mass action would certainly alter the entire political landscape in favor of the workers and their allies, and make it easier to win future struggles.

The core of the TL's polemic is the assertion that a "general strike poses the question of *power*—which class shall rule, the bourgeoisie or the proletariat?" Having

framed the issue in these terms they dismiss our call for a general strike to defeat a capitalist offensive, and bring down the government that is spearheading it, as "nothing more than pressure tactics aimed at a parliamentary shake-up." The SL's 1974 article was directed against exactly this brainless syllogism. While acknowledging that victory cannot be guaranteed in advance, the then-revolutionary SL asserted that:

"it would be the worst kind of scholastic passivity to argue that the workers must accept, without struggle, whatever the Tories do to them because their leaders might betray a general strike that could win."

If a general strike were *only* appropriate in situations where the struggle for power is immediately posed, it would be difficult to justify the Toledo, Minneapolis or San Francisco general strikes of 1934. All of these began as limited and defensive local actions—but they touched off a labor upsurge that finally established industrial unionism in North America (see "American Labor Besieged," *1917* No. 19).

During the 1970s the SL itself called for general strikes in a variety of situations where the level of social struggle was no higher than it is in Ontario today. For example, *WV* No. 41 (29 March 1974) reported that the Bay Area SL had published a leaflet entitled "For a Political General Strike! For Full Labor Solidarity!" advocating the expansion of a public sector strike wave into a city-wide general strike. *WV* No. 55, (25 October 1974) raised the call "For a General Strike Against Proposition 'L'" in response to attacks on civic workers in San Francisco. The front page of the 17 January 1975 *WV* featured a picture of an SL contingent in San Francisco carrying a banner calling for a state-wide general strike in defense of the United Farm Workers. The main headline on the 16 April 1976 issue again called "For an S.F. General Strike!," this time in response to a union-busting offensive against the municipal unions.

The revolutionary SL did not limit such calls to the Bay Area. The 6 June 1975 *WV* called "For a Citywide General Strike Against Layoffs" in New York. A few months later, in November 1975, *WV* ran an article calling "For A General Strike to Restore Labor Government" in Australia. Over the years it also called for general strikes in France, Spain and elsewhere—even, in 1976, in Canada!

The fight to forge a revolutionary leadership for the unions is not something that can be accomplished by exhortation. It requires the intersection of the communist program (embodied primarily in revolutionary cadres in the unions) with the actual, living struggles of the masses. In situations where the workers are confronted by a generalized assault by the capitalists the job of Marxists is to promote a generalized response, and to focus attention on the necessary *next step*, as we explained in our previous issue:

"The masses want a general strike. The bureaucrats are afraid to initiate one. In this circumstance, the call for a general strike can both expose the bureaucrats' cowardice and demonstrate to militant workers (who may even be anti-communist) that, at least on this one question, the communists are right against their existing leaders. This is the only way that revolutionaries *can* begin the struggle to 'politically defeat and replace' the misleaders."

—*1917*, No. 19