

Why I am a Communist

Mike Gold

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NOTE: This article was Gold's contribution to a collection of autobiographical sketches contributed by literary radicals to the September 1932 New Masses. Gold was twenty-one in April 1914, not eighteen as he recalled here. In later accounts of the Union Square demonstration which turned him into a committed radical, Gold recalled that it was Elizabeth Gurley Flynn (then the I.W.W. "rebel girl"; later a leader of the Communist Party) whom he heard address that rally, instead of Emma Goldman and other anarchists as he reported here. Actually, both Flynn and Goldman addressed separate rallies in Union Square in the spring of 1914, but Gold's recollection in this article is probably the accurate one. It is interesting to compare Gold's attitudes toward the Socialist Party in this article and in his "A Love Letter for France" three years later.

In 1914 there was an unemployment crisis in America, and I was one of its victims. I was 18 years old, a factory worker and shipping clerk with five years experience, and the chief support of a fatherless family. Unemployment was no academic matter to me, but the blackest and most personal tragedy.

Well, the hungry workers were raising hell in New York. There were demonstrations, marches, and raids on fashionable Fifth Avenue churches by the unemployed. The anarchists were then still a brilliant and fearless revolutionary group in America, and they led the fight in New York.

I blundered into a big Union Square meeting, where Alexander Berkman, Emma Goldman, Leonard Abbott and other anarchists spoke. The cops, as usual, pointed the anarchist denunciations of capitalism by smashing into the meeting, cracking the skulls and ribs of everyone present. I saw a woman knocked down by a beefy cop's club. She screamed, and instinctively I ran across the square to help her. I was knocked down myself, booted, and managed to escape the hospital only by sheer luck.

I have always been grateful to that cop and his club. For one thing, he introduced me to literature and revolution. I had not read a single book in five years; nothing except the sporting page of news-

papers. I hadn't thought much about anything except baseball, jobs, food, sleep and Sundays at Coney Island. I was a prize-fight fanatic and amateur boxer. Now I grew so bitter because of that cop that I went around to the anarchist Ferrer School and discovered books – I discovered history, poetry, science, and the class struggle.

Nobody who has not gone through this proletarian experience can ever understand the fever that seized me in the next year. I read myself almost blind each night after work. My mind woke up like a suppressed volcano. I can never discharge this personal debt to the revolutionary movement – it gave me a mind.

And I think I can understand what the Soviet state means today to millions of grateful Russian workers and peasants – it has given them a mind.

I was an anarchist for several years. The poetry, the strong passions and naive ideology of that movement appealed to a literary adolescent. I found a job as night porter at the Adams Express Company depot on West 47th Street. I wrestled big trunks and half-ton cases from seven at night until seven the next morning. I sweated, but in my mind I lived in the idealistic world of Shelley, Blake, Walt Whitman, Kropotkin. I was a revolutionist, but it never occurred to me to do anything about it. Nothing, really, was demanded of me.

It was the I.W.W. who made me conscious of the proletarian basis of the revolution. I left New York, had some road experiences, and was present in several Wobbly strikes. The history of this heroic organization has still to be written. It is decadent now, but among the finest veteran leaders of American Communism are those who went through the I.W.W. experience – Bill Haywood, William Z. Foster, Bill Dunne, Earl Browder, Harrison George, and others. (But of course nobody ought feel grateful for this to the bourgeois Civil Liberties liberals who now run the poor old Wobblies.)

The War came; the Russian Revolution? I was against the War, I was 100 per cent with the Bolsheviks. It seemed marvelous then, beyond any words, and it still is as marvelous, that the workers' state had come down from the clouds of Shelley's dream and established itself on the earth.

We formed a Red Guard of about a thousand youth in New York, which Hugo Gellert and I joined, to go to Russia and fight for the cause. Our captain went to Washington to interview the State Department, but they told him that if we wanted to fight we had

better enlist for France. This, of course, didn't satisfy a bunch of young Red Guards.

And now I will end the autobiography by saying that the Russian Revolution forced me to read Lenin. I read his pamphlet, *State and Revolution*, and for the first time really seemed to understand the necessary historical steps by which the world could be changed from a filthy capitalist jungle into an earthly paradise of socialism.

Till then, the revolution had been a queer mixture in my mind that now is difficult to describe. One half of me knew the proletarian realities of bastardly foremen, lousy jobs, the misery of reading the want ads each morning, cops' clubs, etc. The other half was full of the most extraordinary mystic hash, the result of reading. Let me confess it now – I took Shelley, Blake, and Walt Whitman quite literally. They were my real guides to revolutionary action. But our great teacher Lenin clarified everything for me.

The Communist dream is beautiful, he seemed to say in his axelike words, the greatest man has ever formed. The revolution is this highest poetry of the human race. But to be mystic about it means admitting it is only a dream, and can never be realized. A revolutionist ought never lose sight of the wonderful goal (Anarchism, so Lenin stated it) – but he is a traitor, a misleader and a source of dangerous confusion if for even a moment he neglects the daily class struggle, the links in the revolutionary chain.

Did one really want the socialist world? Then one must discard every bit of romantic nonsense, one must become as practical in this business as the enemy, who was never romantic, but who shot and jailed romantics and amateurs.

Yes, I learned from Leninism never to lose sight of the ultimate goal; also never to lose sight of the practical steps in attaining it. I cannot tell what a great lesson this was to me; I can only say that its effect was to make me study economics for the first time.

Today I might sum up my attitude in a few paragraphs. Communism can't be summed up that way; it is a new world larger than that found by Columbus, and thousands of poets, economists, literary critics, and above all, workers, are mapping it out and creating its history.

But this is a symposium, space is valuable, so here are a few ideas:

1. We must have a Socialist world. Capitalism is literally destroying the human race; it has broken down, it can no longer feed

the multitudes; it is a bandit, also, and must be executed before it murders another ten million young men in another war.

2. The intellectuals, the teachers, engineers, critics, art photographers, ballet masters, etc. haven't the numbers, or the economic power or the will or the sheer necessity of ushering in a socialist world. Only the working class satisfies these requirements. To free itself it is forced to bring in socialism. The intellectuals have a favored servant status in capitalism; and their chief aims will remain fascist. Like good flunkies the majority of them will remain incorrigibly "loyalist." They will try to patch up the master's failing fortunes; they will invent "planning" schemes, or elect Norman Thomas as President to stave off a revolution (a Socialist revolution); they will flock around a Woodrow Wilson, a Franklin Roosevelt, and then a Mussolini; yes, they will hunt saviors for capitalism; we know too well these liberals who are liberal in America, but now may be found in the Fascist ranks of Europe and the Orient. Perhaps ten percent of them really want socialism, and will join the working-class ranks and help enormously. But this will be the cream of the intellectuals.

3. Only the working class can bring in Socialism. The one political problem of our time, therefore, is how the working class can be organized and led to the conquest of the state and to socialism. There is no other problem.

4. Many groups have fought for this leadership. By now history has given all of them a chance at power, and it is possible to state exactly what each will do to bring in socialism.

5. The anarchists may be dismissed as a small and moribund sect. Their chief form of action today is not against capitalism, but against the Russian Revolution. The I.W.W. and syndicalist movement can be described in the same terms. The Socialist and Communist parties are the chief international rivals for leadership of the working class. And both have controlled great nations.

6. The Socialists may best be analyzed, perhaps, by their actions in Germany, where they made a revolution. The Socialist leaders there have swung into the ranks of reaction. They murdered Liebknecht and Luxemburg at the beginning of their regime, and they ended by advising the working class to vote for Von Hindenburg. They established no socialism. They tolerated fascism, even made compacts with it, until it grew strong enough to destroy them. Their political strategy had as goal not the defense of workers'

rights and the establishment of socialism, but the patching up of capitalism. The same story could be told of Ramsay MacDonald's England, or Chiang Kai-Shek's China, or of Japan, where two-thirds of the Socialist party moved over into a new Fascist party to back their native imperialists in the rape of Manchuria. Is all this true, or isn't it? How can anyone defend such a party? How can anyone say any longer that this international Socialist party can be trusted to bring in socialism? Even in America they run true to form, as in the case of their leader, Morris Hillquit. He acted as lawyer for certain Czarist millionaires who tried to seize Soviet funds on the grounds that their oil wells had been nationalized (socialism). Yes, Hillquit, the Socialist leader, pleaded in a long brief that socialism is illegal. And Norman Thomas, the Socialist president, in a long speech said that socialism meant confiscation, and that lie was against confiscation. In Milwaukee a Socialist mayor gives \$1.31 worth of food to each starving unemployed family per week, and beats them up when they demonstrate for more. Is this a fact, or isn't it? And is it socialism?

7. The Socialists are the great alibi merchants of the modern world. Their constant plea, when in power, has always been that the time was not yet ripe for socialism. But the time was not ripe either, in Russia, when the Communists took power. The difficulties were the most enormous and heartbreaking that ever faced a group of leaders. But in the midst of war, revolution, famine, an armed intervention by seventeen capitalist nations, the Communists struck the first blow for socialism. They have gone on; nobody lies any longer that Russia is swinging back to capitalism. While capitalism strangles in the fatal web of its own contradictions, the Soviet state grows stronger and wins new victories for socialism. The majestic thunder of the Five-Year Plan has shaken the world. We can trust this party to bring in socialism, therefore; it has already begun the historic task.

8. It is an international party, with units in each country. It has developed tactics, a discipline, a literature; and to it daily are attracted the most fearless and intelligent elements of the working class. It makes mistakes. It suffers defeats. But it marches on. Its discipline may seem harsh at times, but when the world war comes the Communist International will not split up into national units fighting each other under the capitalist flags, as did the Socialist International. It will not betray us; for it purges itself constantly of

every taint of capitalist influence. We can trust this party; but we cannot trust the Hillquits, Ramsay MacDonalds and Scheidemanns of the Socialist movement.

9. Is there another instrument, another political party in the world today, as well-tempered, as fearless, as studious and flexible, in as deadly earnest about the birth of socialism as this Communist Party? If there is not, then whoever injures or criticizes this party without helping it, whoever forms rival parties or sects, is of necessity a traitor to the coming of socialism.

10. I have wanted for fifteen years one supreme thing. I have wanted it more than love, health, fame or security. It is world socialism that I want – for I know this alone can banish the miseries of the world I now live in. It will free the factory slaves, the farm drudges, it will set women free, and restore the Negro race to its human rights. I know that the world will be beautiful soon in the sunlight of proletarian brotherhood; meanwhile, the struggle. And I want socialism so much that I accept this fierce, crude struggle as my fate in time; I accept its disciplines and necessities; I become as practical and realistic as possible for me; I want victory.

Whoever really desires the victory of socialism is forced today into only one party – the Communist. Whatever strengthens the Communist Party brings socialism nearer. The liberal and opportunist roads seem smoother and fairer, but they lead nowhere. The Communist road is rough, dangerous and often confusing, but it happens to be the only road that leads into the new world.