Revolutionary Interlude in France
BY LEON TROTSKY

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We MUST repeat once again that the serious capitalist press like the Paris Temps or the London Times has made a much more correct and penetrating evaluation of the meaning of the June events in France and Belgium than has the press of the People’s Front. While the Socialist and Communist official organs, tagging behind Blum, talk about the beginning of the “peaceful transformation of the social regime in France,” the conservative press insists that in France a revolution has begun and that it will inevitably assume violent forms during the next stages. It would be a mistake to view this prognosis as solely or chiefly intended to frighten the property owners. The representatives of big capital are capable of following the social struggle very realistically. Contrariwise, petty bourgeois politicians readily incline to accept their own desires for reality. Standing between the principal classes, finance capital and the proletariat, the Messrs. “Reformers” propose that both of the opponents accept the middle course which they have greatly labored to elaborate in the General Staff of the People’s Front, and which they themselves interpret differently. However, they will shortly have occasion to convince themselves that it is much easier to reconcile class contradictions in leading articles than in governmental activity, especially in the very heat of a social crisis.

In parliament an ironical charge has been hurled against Blum that he carried on negotiations concerning the demands of the strikers with representatives of the “200 families.” “And who else was there for me to negotiate with?” wittily replied the Premier. In point of fact, if any negotiations are to be carried on with the bourgeoisie, then it is necessary to choose the real masters, those capable of deciding for themselves and of issuing orders to others. But in that case, it was pointless to have so noisily declared war against them! Within the framework of the bourgeois regime, its laws and mechanics, each one of the “200 families” is incomparably more powerful than the Blum Government. The financial magnates represent the crown of the bourgeois system of France, while the Blum Government, despite all its electoral successes, “crows” only a brief interlude between the two contending camps.

At the present moment, in the first half of July, it might superficially seem as if everything had more or less returned to normal. As a matter of fact, within the depths of the proletariat, as well as among the summits of the ruling classes, a well-nigh automatic preparation for a new conflict is now going on. The very essence of the matter lies in the fact that the reforms, very meager as they are in substance, upon which the capitalists and the leaders of the labor organizations agreed in June, are not viable, because they are already beyond the powers of declining capitalism, taken as a whole. The financial oligarchy, which did a swimming business in the very heat of the crisis, could, of course, abide both with the forty-hour week, paid vacations, and so on, but the hundreds of thousands of middle and petty entrepreneurs, whom finance capital leans upon whose shoulders it now is loading the costs of its agreement with Blum, must either submit docilely to ruin or seek, in their turn, to load the costs of social reforms upon the workers and peasants, as consumers.

Blum, to be sure, has more than once expatiated in the Chamber and in the press upon the enticing prospect of a general economic revival and of a rapidly expanding turnover which will make it possible to lower considerably the general productive costs and therefore allow of increased expenditures for labor power without a rise in commodity prices. In point of fact such combined economic processes were frequently to be observed in the past. They mark the entire history of rising capitalism. The only trouble is that Blum is trying to project into the future what has irrevocably receded into the past. Politicians, subject to such an aberration, may call themselves socialists and even communists but they fix their eyes not ahead but behind them, and they are therefore a brake upon progress.

French capitalism with its celebrated “equilibrium” between agriculture and industry entered into the stage of decline later than Italy and Germany but no less irresistibly. This is not a phrase from a revolutionary proclamation, but a statement of incontrovertible fact. The productive forces of France have outgrown the bounds of private property and the boundaries of the state. Governmental intervention on the foundations of a capitalist regime can be of assistance only in shifting the unprofitable expenditures of the decline from one class to another. Which class would that be? When the Socialist Premier has to carry on negotiations about a "more just" distribution of the national income, he is unable, as we have already learned, to find any worthy partners other than the representatives of the "200 families." Holding in their hands all the basic levers of industry, credit, and commerce, the financial magnates shift the costs of the agreement upon the "middle classes," compelling them by reason of this very thing to enter into a struggle with the workers. In this now lies the crux of the situation.

The manufacturers and the merchants present their ledgers to the ministers and say, "We cannot do it." The government, calling to mind old textbooks of political economy, replies, "It is necessary to cut down the costs of production." But this is easier said than done. Moreover, in the given conditions technological improvements would mean increased unemployment, and ultimately a deepening of the crisis. The workers, on their part, are protesting against the fact that the incipient increases in prices
threaten to devour their conquests. The government issues orders to the prefects that they launch a campaign against the high cost of living. But the prefects know from long experience that it is much easier to lower the tone of an oppositionist paper than to lower the price of meat. The wave of mounting prices still lies ahead.

The small manufacturers, tradesmen and, in their wake, the peasants will become more and more disillusioned with the People’s Front, from which they expected immediate salvation far more directly and innocently than did the workers. The fundamental political contradiction of the People’s Front lies in the fact that the politicians of the Golden Mean at its head, in their fear of “scaring” the middle classes, do not transgress the bounds of the old social regime, that is, the historical blind alley. Meanwhile, the so-called middle classes—not their summits, of course, but the lower ranks—sense the impasse at every step and are not at all afraid of bold decisions, but on the contrary demand them as a riddance from the noose. “Do not expect miracles from us!” the pedants in power keep repeating. But the gist of the matter lies precisely in the fact that without “miracles,” without heroic decisions, without a complete overturn in property relations—without the concentration of the banking system, of the basic branches of industry, and of foreign trade in the hands of the state—there is no salvation for the petty bourgeoisie of the city and country. If the “middle classes” in whose name the People’s Front was expressly created are unable to find revolutionary audacity from the left, they will seek it on the right. The petty bourgeoisie is gripped by fever and must inevitably toss from side to side. Meanwhile, the big capitalists are confidently watching for such a turn as will make a beginning for fascism not only as a semi-military organization of bourgeois papas’ sons with automobiles and airplanes but as a real mass movement in France.

The workers in June exerted colossal pressure upon the ruling classes, but they did not carry it to its conclusion. They evinced their revolutionary might but also their weakness: the lack of a program and of a leadership. All the props of capitalist society and all of its incurable ulcers remain intact. Now the period is unfolding of the preparations for a counter-pressure: repressions against the left agitators, the increasingly envenomed agitation on the part of the right agitators, experimentations with rising prices, mobilizations of manufacturers for mass lockouts. The trade unions of France which on the eve of the strike hardly numbered one million members are now approaching the five million mark. This unprecedented mass influx is indicative of the feelings that inspire the labor masses. There cannot even be talk that they will permit the costs of their own conquests to be loaded upon themselves without a struggle. The ministers and the official leaders are indefatigable in urging the workers to remain seated peacefully and not to hinder the government while it is working over the solution of problems. But inasmuch as the government, in the nature of things, is incapable of solving any problem whatever; inasmuch as the June concessions were gained thanks to the strike and not patient waiting; inasmuch as every new day will expose the bankruptcy of the government in the face of the developing counter-offensive of capital, these monotonous exhortations will soon lose their potency. The logic of the situation which flows from the June victory, or, rather, to put it more correctly, from the semi-fictitious character of this victory, will compel the workers to accept the challenge, to embark once again upon a struggle. Taking fright at this prospect, the government shifts to the right. Under the direct pressure of the radical allies, but, in the last analysis, upon the demand of the “200 families,” the Socialist Minister of Internal Affairs announced in the Senate that no further occupations of factories, stores, and farms by the strikers would be tolerated. A warning of this sort cannot, of course, put a halt to the struggle, but it is capable of making it infinitely more decisive and acute.

An absolutely objective analysis, which proceeds from facts and not desires, thus leads us to the conclusion that a new social conflict is being prepared from two sides, and that it must break out with an almost mechanical inevitability. It is not difficult even at the present time to define in general the nature of this conflict. During all revolutionary periods in history, two successive stages may be established which are closely linked together: first, the “elemental” movement of the masses which catches the opponent off-guard and which extorts serious concessions, or, at any rate, promises; and then the ruling classes, sensing that the foundations of their rule are being threatened, prepare for their revenge. The semi-victorious masses evoke impatience. The traditional left leaders, who, like the opponents, were caught unawares by the movement, hope to save the situation by means of conciliatory eloquence, and end by losing their influence. The masses are drawn into a new struggle almost leaderless, without a clear program and without understanding the difficulties ahead. Such a conflict ineluctably arising from the first semi-victory of the masses has often led to their defeat—or semi-defeat. An exception to this rule will hardly be found in the history of revolutions. However, the difference (and it is no slight one) lies in the fact that sometimes the defeat assumes the character of a rout: such for example were the June days, in 1848 in France, which put an end to the revolution; in other cases, however, the semi-defeat proves only a stage toward victory: such a role, for example, was played by the defeat of the Petrograd workers and soldiers in July, 1917. It was precisely the July defeat that accelerated the rise of the Bolsheviks, who were not only able to estimate correctly the situation without any illusions or embellishments but also did not break away from the masses during the most difficult days of failure, sacrifice, and persecution.

Yes, the conservative press is making a sober analysis of the situation. Finance capital with its auxiliary political and military organs cold-bloodedly prepares for revenge. Among the summits of the People’s Front there is nothing except confusion and internal strife. The left newspapers are smothered in moral preachments. The leaders choke with phrases. The ministers vie to show the Bourse that they are mature statesmen. Together, all this implies that the proletariat will be drawn into the impending conflict not only without the leadership of its traditional organizations, as was the case in June, but also against them. But
there is no generally recognized new leadership in existence as yet. Under such conditions one could hardly count upon immediate victory. An attempt to probe into the future would rather lead one to the following alternative: either June days, 1848, or July days, 1917. In other words: either a rout for many years to come, with the inevitable triumph of fascist reaction, or only a severe lesson in strategy as a result of which the working class will mature, renew its leadership, and prepare the conditions for future victory.

The French proletariat is no novice. It has behind it a great number of epoch-making struggles. True, the new generations have to learn each time from their own experience—but they do not begin from the beginning, nor do they learn everything all over again, but through an abbreviated course, as it were. The great tradition permeates the very marrow of the workers and facilitates the selection of the road. Already in June the anonymous leaders of the awakened class had found methods and forms of struggle with magnificent revolutionary tact. The molecular process of mass consciousness is not being suspended now for a single hour. All this enables us to conclude that the new layer of the leaders not only will remain true to the masses in the days of the inevitable and, probably, not far distant conflict, but will also be able to lead the inadequately prepared army from the battle without a rout.

It is not true that the revolutionists in France are allegedly interested in precipitating the conflict, or "artificially" provoking it. Only the dullest police minds are capable of thinking so. Marxist revolutionists see their duty in looking clearly into the face of reality and calling things by their names. To make a timely deduction from the objective situation concerning the prospectives of the second stage is to help the advanced workers not to be caught unawares, and to introduce as much clarity as possible into the consciousness of the struggling masses. In this consists at present the task of a serious political leadership.

The Blum Government—Second Phase

BY M. E. RAVAGE

After barely eight weeks of the Front Populaire the enthusiasm which accompanied it into office has made room for a wave of deep discouragement. On the surface nothing untoward has happened. On the contrary. The component parties and groups are if anything more united than ever. The government has acted with vigor and dispatch, driving through both chambers more essential legislation in forty-odd days than its predecessors put on the statute books in an equal number of years. And yet I believe that I am reporting public sentiment faithfully when I say that the people—and particularly those who contributed to the left victory at the polls—are disenchanted. They feel that the government has carried out nearly every article of the Front Populaire program without carrying out the spirit; that its zeal came more from a desire to pacify the voters than from conviction; in a word, that the Blum Cabinet, instead of being the fighting government of their dreams, has turned out to be a set of brakes.

According to these critics, one saw this restraining temper of the ministry during the great strike. It stood by the workers loyally no doubt, and excused the occupation of the plants, but somewhat after the fashion of a law-abiding parent seeking to exculpate a too adventurous youngster who had got into a scrape. They do not exactly blame Blum and his colleagues. It is perhaps natural, they admit, that a government friendly and in debt to labor, and as it were responsible for it, should be somewhat irked by a strike movement whose ultimate form and consequences no man could foresee, coming at the very instant when it arrived in office. They also understand how it was that the government, moved by a complex of fears—of possible disorder, of stoppage in the public services, of famine and confusion, of a rift with the radicals and the middle classes whom they represent, of losing control, of weakening the defenses of the state so fluid and dangerous an international atmosphere as the present one—exercised itself not to capitalize the magnificent élan of the workers and the vast popular enthusiasm behind it, not to ride the wave toward fundamental reforms in the state machine and the national economy, but to hold the movement within bounds. But they note with melancholy that it was a Socialist-led cabinet that responded in this way, and what is more serious, that having adopted this course it continued in it thenceforward as if by some flaw in temperament. Everything the new government has had to do since then has moved in the same halting, timid tempo. Vincent Auriol's approach to the financial problem, his compromising manner with the banks, the purely legalistic procedure in the decrees dissolving the leagues, and Blum's own attitude at Geneva; everything had a readymade, superficially hearty and fictitious air of boldness, while in reality it was all quite pedestrian and usual, with more than half an eye on the classes that had something to lose by an upheaval.

When people speak of executing articles and neglecting the program, they have in mind specifically the government's failure to purge the administration of its entrenched foes. In North Africa Peyrouton, the fascist son-in-law of the "radical" Malvy, is still pro-consul, as if nothing at all had changed in Paris, though the whole left press, including Blum's own Populaire, roused by the riots and provocations and race-feuds down there, have for weeks been clamoring for his removal. Meanwhile in Marseilles and in Paris itself the "dissolved" leagues, paralyzed for a