

Individual acts

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Many divergent positions have been taken up on the burning of the Reichstag by Van Der Lubbe. In the organs of the communist left (Spartacus, Radencommunist) it was approved as the act of a revolutionary communist. To approve and applaud such an act means calling for it to be repeated. That's why it's important to understand what use it had.

Its only meaning could be to hit, to weaken, the ruling class, the bourgeoisie. There can be no question of this here. The bourgeoisie hasn't been at all hurt by the burning of the Reichstag. Its rule hasn't in any way been weakened. On the contrary, the government has seized the opportunity to strengthen considerably its terror against the workers movement. The ultimate consequences of this have yet to be appreciated.

But even if such an act really did hit or weaken the bourgeoisie, the only consequence of this would be to encourage the workers to believe that such individual acts could liberate them. The great truth that they have to learn, that only the mass action of the entire working class can defeat the bourgeoisie, this basic truth of revolutionary communism, would be obscured from them. It would lead them away from autonomous class action. Instead of concentrating all their forces on propaganda within the working masses revolutionary minorities would exhaust their energies in individual acts which, even when carried out by a large and dedicated group, would in no way shake the domination of the ruling class. With its considerable auxiliary forces, the bourgeoisie could easily master such a group. There has rarely been a minority group which carried out such actions with the devotion, sacrifice and energy of the Russian nihilists half-a-century ago. At certain moments it even seemed that, through a series of well-organized individual assassinations, they would succeed in overthrowing Tsarism. But a French policeman, called in to take over the anti-terrorist struggle in place of the incompetent Russian police, succeeded with his Western energy and organization to annihilate nihilism in a few years. It was only afterwards, with the development of the mass movement, that Tsarism was overthrown.

But doesn't such an act have a value as a demonstration against the abject electoralism which serves to derail the workers' struggles? A demonstration has value if it convinces people by giving an impression of strength, or if it develops consciousness. But are we really to believe that a worker who thinks he's defending his interests by voting social democrat or Communist is going to start doubting this because the Reichstag is burned down? All this is completely derisory compared to what the bourgeoisie itself does to undermine the workers' illusions -- rendering the Reichstag completely impotent, dissolving it or removing it from the decision-making process.

Some German comrades have said that the act could only be positive because it would strike a blow at the workers' confidence in parliamentarism. Doubtless. But we can still ask whether this is looking at things in a rather simplistic way. Democratic illusions would only be introduced from another source. Where there's no right to vote, where parliament is impotent, the conquest of "real democracy" is put forward and the workers imagine that this is the only thing to fight for. In fact, systematic propaganda which uses each event to develop an understanding of the real meaning of parliament and the class struggle can never be side-stepped and is always the essential thing.

Can't individual acts be the signal which sets in motion a mass struggle by giving a radical example? It's a wellknown fact in history that the action of an individual in moments of tension can act as a spark to a powder keg. But the proletarian revolution has nothing in common with the explosion of a powder keg. Even if the Communist Party is trying to convince itself and everyone else that the revolution can break out at any moment, we know that the proletariat still has to form itself for new

mass combats. These sorts of ideas reveal a certain bourgeois romanticism. In past bourgeois revolutions, the rising bourgeoisie, and behind it the people, were confronted with the personalities of sovereigns and their arbitrary oppression. An assassination of a king or a minister could be a signal for a revolt. The idea that in the present period an individual act could set the masses in movement is based on the bourgeois concept of the "chief", not an elected party leader, but a self-appointed chief, whose action mobilizes the passive masses. The proletarian revolution has nothing to do with this out-dated romanticism of the chief. All initiative has to come from the class, pushed forward by massive social forces.

But, after all, the masses are made up of individuals and mass actions contain a whole number of individual actions. Of course, and here we come to the real value of individual acts. Separated from mass action, the act of an individual who thinks he can accomplish great things on his own is useless. But as part of a mass movement, it's of the greatest importance. The class in struggle isn't a regiment of identical puppets marching in step and accomplishing great things through the blind force of its own movement. It is on the contrary a mass of multiple personalities, pushed forward by the same will, supporting itself, exhorting itself, giving itself courage. The irresistible strength of such a movement is based on many different strengths all converging towards the same goal. In this context, the most audacious bravery can express itself in individual acts of courage, since it is the clear understanding of all the others which directs these acts towards a real goal, so that the fruits of such acts aren't lost. In an ascending movement, this inter-action of strengths and acts is of the greatest value, when it's directed by a clear understanding by the workers about what needs to be done and about how to develop their combativity. But in these cases, it takes a lot more tenacity, audaciousness and courage than it takes to burn a parliament!