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The Staying Power of A Myth

Emma Goldman

5th January 1938

The glad tidings from Moscow under date of November 27th about the pact between the Soviet Trade Unions and the International Federation of Trade Unions (Amsterdam International) shows once more the staying power of a myth.

The Soviet Trade Unions have long ago ceased to exist as a living body, as have indeed all other organisations that have played their part in the Russian Revolution. As long ago as 1920, they had been degraded into a mere cog in the wheel of the Soviet machinery. Nor was it Stalin who had shorn the Soviet Trade Unions of their plumage. It was Lenin who in the famous controversy in that year about the functions of Trade Unionism under the Dictatorship had declared that the only function of the Trade Unions was to be a school for communism. One of his many opponents among the old Marxists at the time was Rozanov. He insisted that Trade Unionism must continue to safeguard the rights of the workers. For giving expression to such “heresy” he was promptly suspended from all participation in the Soviet Trade Unions.

A year later Lenin — yes, and Trotsky — upraised in no mistaken terms the first Labour opposition led by Kolontay and Shliapnikov. Their opposition was mainly against the bureau-

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cracy, particularly in the Soviet Trade Unions. As punishment for this offence, Shliapnikov as a “peeved Commissar” (the actual term used by Lenin in regard to him) was exiled to the Caucasus for a “cure,” while Kolontay was at first put under “house arrest” and subsequently given a diplomatic job outside of Russia, as likely to render her less troublesome than if she were allowed to stay on in the so-called socialist Republic. The rank and file of that pioneer opposition were among the first of the Bolsheviks to begin the weary tramp to the newly created concentration camps.

After Lenin’s death, Stalin continued the process of emasculation of the Trade Unions. It must be admitted he had no easy task. Rozanov, Tomsky and a few others fought to maintain the rights of the workers within their Trade Unions. They tried, again and again, to infuse new life into them, and to wrest from Stalin the right to direct themselves the affairs of the Labour organisations. But the iron master proved stronger than them. Rozanov, at the age of 80, was exiled, and all his interpretations of Marx were destroyed. Tomsky, as is generally known, was quite recently driven to suicide — no doubt preferring it to execution.

Numerous other champions of the principle of Independence for the Soviet Trade Unions suffered the same fate. Since then all life has been squeezed out of the trade unions, till they became a mere corpse, a shadow of their former selves, only to be revived and trailed out for show on those occasions when Trade Unionists from other countries come on a visit to the Soviet Republic.

As far as the Socialist Republic itself is concerned, however, the Trade Unions have to all intents and purposes ceased to exist.

Is it possible that Messrs. Jouhaux, Citrine and the rest are unaware of this state of affairs in regard to the Russian Trade Unions. Or can it be that they have become a party to this outrageous deception as to the condition of the Trade Unions in

Soviet Russia? Whatever it is, Messrs. Jouhaux, Citrine and the others have, it would appear, fallen into Stalin's trap. He will tie them to the "corpse" and will not let them go until the whole of the Trade Union ranks is infested with its putrid odour.

The "pact" is supposed to aim at the workers' unity against War and Fascism. Very commendable indeed. The question only is "What war? and which kind of against war also to include Stalin's Imperialist designs? And is his Dictatorship (which only differs from Hitler's and Mussolini's by its colour) to be included in the struggle against Fascism? Far from it. In point of fact, Stalin is willing to make a pact with the very people whom he dragged through the mire not so long ago. What is a pact with "social patriots," "counter-revolutionists" and other such fancy "denominations" compared with Stalin's brazen reversal of all revolutionary values worth? On top of the betrayal of the Russian Revolution, the savage extermination going on continuously of the old Bolshevik guard now follows the sacrifice of the Spanish Revolution and the Anti-Fascist struggle, and last but by no means least, the sacrifice of his own care fully built up Chinese Communist Army. The calumny and lies about a few trade union leaders is mere child's play — Stalin knows what he is about: in making the Citrines, Jouhaux, the Schevenels and Unions in Soviet Russia still have living fibre, he hopes eventually to get these leaders to act as recruiting agents not merely against Capitalist wars but also of the "holy" war in defence of his Empire and bloodstained Dominion which can well compare with Hitler's and Mussolini's.

A myth has tremendous staying power. For twenty years the Russian myth has benumbed the minds and blunted the sensibilities of the intelligentsia and many of the workers. The corpse that has now been propped up to appear as a living body is an additional proof that the myth goes on. All the more reason to cry out against the deception and to show it up as the delusion and snare which is Soviet Russia. Only when the work-

ers in every country will realise this, will real unity be achieved
— real unity in the struggle against every shade of Fascism and
for the only war worth fighting for — the Defence of the Social
Revolution.