

**Anton Pannekoek**

**Revolt of the scientists**

# I

Panic pervades the intellectual layers of American society. Whereas the peoples of Europe were used to war and damage, to destruction and insecurity in life, Americans felt safe in being separated by oceans from dangerous foes, until the atom bomb fell upon Hiroshima; the first scientists, realizing what it meant, called themselves "frightened men."

There is no secret; and there is no defense. Within some few years Russia and many smaller countries can have their installations ready to make atom bombs by the hundreds, just like America, Atom bombs are the cheapest means of town-destruction; General H. H. Arnold computed that destruction per square mile by means of B-29 bombs cost 3 million dollars by means of the Hiroshima bomb only half a million (destroying a value of 160 million). Carried by airplanes or rockets, they can cross the ocean in numbers, and by agents of foreign powers -- Russia has numbers of devoted agents in every country -- they can easily be smuggled in and hidden, to destroy everything for miles around at the fixed moment. An immense army of security officers and spies will be needed, continually to inspect every box or case in any house. In penetrating words Urey, one of the foremost physicists in America, points out how the deadly fear of annihilation will destroy all the liberties of American citizens. Nor will an attempt to forestall the danger through world conquest by America be a way out. "Not only may our own culture be destroyed by these weapons of mass destruction, but all civilizations as they exist in the world may

be retarded and weakened for centuries to come. It all adds up to the most dangerous situation that humanity has ever faced in all history."

In this all his colleagues agree, and they rebel. They refuse now that the German war is over and won, to take part in further research for military use, to construct and perfect weapons. (The government, to break this strike has already imported hundreds of German Nazi-physicists.) The atomic scientists propose international control of all atomic technics and research, and give out the slogan: no more war. An extensive propaganda is put out to impress the American people that a new age, "the atomic age" has begun, and that it is incumbent upon them all to fight the impending danger. Professor Langmuir explains that America must come to an understanding with Russia and overcome the mutual mistrust. "We don't like their form of government and they don't like ours," but he adds, quoting the Atlantic Charter "we have to respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live. Manifestly, he thinks that the Russian people have deliberately, by preference, chosen their dictatorship.

There is now, ever again, talk of an understanding between Russia and America. Certainly, between the peoples, the working masses, there would be no difficulty, if only they could reach one another. But "Russia": that is the group of dictatorially ruling officials, for whom the chief thing is to keep their power over the exploited, gagged masses. Or "America": that is the group of millionaires, ruling by means of their

agents, senators, presidents, congressmen, editors, for whom the chief thing is to keep their power over the exploited fooled masses. And to extend their power over the world; American capitalism as the most powerful aspiring to complete world-domination, Russian state-capitalism as the more advanced economic organization, expecting superiority by delaying the conflict, Theoretically it does not seem entirely impossible that these two groups of exploiters should come to an agreement of uniting into one, though not homogenous world-dominating class; just as now within one political unit the capitalist groups compete and fight one another without killing or shooting. In America many Voices are raised already, demanding one supreme world-government ("One world or none!") -- they feel quite sure that it would mean an American world-government; of course the Russian rulers refuse. But as long as there are large populations and countries still to be conquered by capitalism -- as in China -- by destruction of old settled conditions and heavier suffering of the masses, violence and bloodshed will not disappear from the earth, and passionate greed will engender a warlike spirit, Moreover in world war capital makes the biggest profits; 19 shipbuilding companies with a total capital of 23,000,000 made profits amounting to 356,000,000 in the last war. So it does not seem probable that world peace and unity of the ruling classes will be reached.

Capitalist society with its mighty technical and its entirely inadequate spiritual and moral powers is often compared to a powerful racing car with a baby at the wheel. Now the car is seen steering downright towards the abyss. President Truman a

year ago in a message to Congress said: "the release of atomic energy constitutes a force too revolutionary to consider in the framework of old ideas." What we see in politics and international talk is the steadfast, nearly invariable dominance of the old ideas. The Army, here and yonder, prepares in secret more and more destructive atomic weapons. Performing their narrow duty in accordance with civil government; international talk goes on in the old frame; the mutual proposals of the governments have the old-fashion sound of war-threats and peace-phrases.

Is that mere clumsiness of thought? No, the still reigning "old ideas" represent the still existing old foundations of society, the mastery of rapacious exploiters. The words of the president were idle words. The atom bomb surely is a revolutionary factor. But it has not revolutionized the basis of society.

Will the "revolting" scientists change this basis? They do no more than try to impress the danger of atomic war upon the citizens, They cannot do any more, they are only learned physicists; they are not social guides; they are not acquainted with the real nature of social relations. Learned societies in different countries now demand for the scientist control of and a say in politics, part of the responsibility in government. They are not aware that the right of governing is not given but must be conquered. In one of the pamphlets issued to rouse the people, the question asked by the readers: what can I do? -- is answered thus: "Let your Congressmen know that you expect them to find a way to banish from the world both the causes and the weapons of war, regardless of how many presidents

and prejudices must be set aside." That will do it! Indeed, tens of thousands of letters were received already by Congress (from among tens of million, of voters, hence 99.9 percent showed no interest). Probably the Congressmen receiving such letters went to their party bosses inside or outside of the Administration to take counsel and instructions: and so everything remains in the same hands directed by the "old ideas" of politics.

World-threatening dangers cannot be averted by means of unimportant trifles.

## II

Could anything otherwise be done, then, to prevent atomic war? Certainly. But in order to see this, the question must be put in a wider context. Can the people, in extreme cases, force its will upon the rulers -- directly, hence otherwise than by the long, notoriously illusionary way of electing an entirely new and new-minded Congress? Suppose an immediate danger of war threatens, have the working masses, provided they have the decided will to prevent the war, any possibility of enforcing their will upon an unwilling war-preparing government? They have, if they are really prepared to uphold their aim resolutely.

It must be borne in mind that a government, a ruling class cannot go to war if the people are unwilling and resisting. Therefore a moral and intellectual preparation is no less necessary than a technical and organizational preparation. They know intuitively what Clausewitz the well-known German

author of "On War" expressed in this way: that in every war spiritual forces play the main role. Systematic propaganda in the press, on the radio and in the movies, must awaken the patriotic bellicose spirit and suppress the instinctive but unorganized resistance. So it is certain that a decided, conscious refusal by the masses of the people, manifested in an outspoken, widely heard protest, is a first-rank political factor and can have a determining influence upon government policy. Such protest can assume different forms of increasing stringency.

It may appear first in mass meetings voting sharp resolutions. The protest will be more effective, if -- in tens and hundreds -- of thousands -- the masses go into the streets in endless processions; against such numbers all riot-acts and court injunctions are meaningless. And if these are not sufficient, or are suppressed by military force, the workers and employees in transport and industry can strike. Not for wages, but to save society. A mass political strike is not a mechanical impediment to war, but a means of moral pressure. It is the most serious admonition to government of the resolute will of the people for peace. Surely it would be a revolutionary action; but as Truman said, the atom bomb is a revolutionary factor.

Such an action is not lightly to be entered upon. Government and the ruling class will try to break this resistance with all the means of moral and physical suppression. So it will be a hard fight, demanding sacrifices, steadfastness and endurance. The psychological factors for such a fight are not at once present in full vigor; they need time to develop under heavy spiritual

strain. As long as citizens can be lulled by an appeal to nationalism -- even in the illustrated leaflets against atomic war the star-spangled banner made its appearance -- and listen to the promise that the big profits of American world-domination will pour out over the entire business world; as long as the workers go on strike and go to work at the command of some union chieftain, instead of taking action and decision over their lot entirely into their own hands -- the psychological conditions for such actions of protest will be lacking. But it must be emphasized that in them lies the only warrant of world peace.

Will not such actions, by laming the war-preparations, play into the hands of the foe and prepare for the defeat of the home country? Everybody in America knows that Russia is a dictatorship able to go its course unimpaired by the powerless masses, But in Russia the workers, to the last child, know that the USA is ruled by big capitalism aspiring to world-domination, and to that end is able to muster the entire American people, workers as well as middle-class. At least up to now. Will they, then, blame their rulers for preparing for a war of defense? Thus the ring of fate, fettering each working class to masters is closed. How can it be broken?

In Russia the workers are powerless, kept in spiritual as well as physical bondage. The American workers are free to take up the fight, free to act, to read, to publish, to discuss, to instruct themselves, to combine in unions, to assemble in meeting, to strike. Hence it is only here that the fight for peace can begin. If there is any way to encourage, from the outside, resistance of oppositional elements among the Russian masses against the



dictatorship, it consists in mass-actions of American workers against capitalist power. If they should proceed to wrench the decision on policy from big capital, the most essential step to deter the threat of atomic war would be made.

At the same time such action would be the first step towards social revolution overthrowing capitalism itself. Then the atom bomb would be a revolutionary factor indeed, revolutionizing the basis of society. Then the "atomic age" would inaugurate the age of freedom.

Of course nobody expects the atomic scientists to go that far. They have given their expert warning, as physicists. More they cannot do. It is up to others to take the warning.