SOME months ago the painter Picasso joined the Communist Party in France. This welcome step gave rise to much discussion about the art of Picasso. This discussion coincided with the intensive ideological struggle about the arts and artists in many lands, a struggle which has reached the highest level in the Soviet Union, the land of Socialism, in a "social order which is a hundred times higher and better than any bourgeois social order." (Zhdanov)

In addition to reprints of outstanding declarations by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bol’sheviks) and the report, "On The Errors of Soviet Literary Journals" (C.R. Feb. '47), by Zhdanov, a discussion has appeared in our Review starting with the article by comrade Oldham.

Comrade Oldham opens: "To many Communists Picasso is puzzling. They consider his art obscure and unintelligible. He does not understand this; he does not unravel the puzzle for us, he does not enlighten the obscurity, he does not reveal the meaning. He does not come to grips with the essential issue, the content, the direction of the art of Picasso. Because Picasso joins the Party, comrade Oldham goes beyond the desirable careful handling of the new recruit, who brings with him much from his past experience that has to be eradicated, and becomes conciliatory. That does not help the new member and more important for us in such matters, it does not help our members."

He quotes two questions from ordinary people: "What has Picasso been doing?" and "How can we understand the pictures Picasso has painted?"

"We have been driving at the purpose of the art of Picasso. This purpose has been well revealed by comrade Zhdanov."

Comrade Oldham continues: "The errors of Soviet art"... "Picasso's paintings give little or no direction to (the) persons who have all good intentions, who want to struggle in the way that the Picassos suffer from 40 years of servility to the decadent system of capitalism*..." (Review, Feb. '48).

"This discussion coincided with the intense interest in Picasso. The Errors of Soviet Art"... "As Comrade Fox put it (Review, Nov. '47), the fact is that "Picasso's later work is obscure, it is not understood by ordinary people, does not (with its exceptions) inspire them in their forward march, and that Picasso is (quoting D. K.) out of touch with any considerable body of the people."

"An artist who is not understood by ordinary people, who makes no appeal to the mass of ordinary people, is not a great artist, as, artist who is not understood by ordinary people is a poor artist. A painter whose work no one understands (I reject speculation) is not an artist."

Comrade Oldham concludes: "Whatever may be said about definitions, this must be included, he is an artist (with good or ill) who succeeds, in any medium, to convey to an audience his feeling, his emotion, who succeeds in touching the soul, from the standpoint of progress, the importance of being in touch with a considerable body of people, the importance of being understood by ordinary people."

Evidently the resistance movement gave Picasso an opportunity, gave him some hope, relieved an order amid chaos, and he joined the "Pouvoir des Ouvriers" so good. But must he not learn why he painted as he did and begin to work for a considerable body of ordinary people? To do this he must expose the warmongers; for people who want democracy and so expose fascists and fascist trends; for people who are fighting for the poor."

He concludes: "He then be in touch with a considerable body of people, the people who want democracy and the fight with the exploited."

Comrade Oldham believes that much of Picasso's work "reflects very effectively the anarchy, horror and cruelty of capitalism, in decay. But that is not enough. We cannot be satisfied with this. He must do so in such a way as to arouse hatred, opposition, determination to rid the world of capitalism, to aid in progress. Some people reflect the same in their bodies in a mental hospital, and that is the reflection recorded on canvas by many painters. It is meaningless to the people, often, probably the painter, it may be understood (explained) but it is not art, it may be understood by a psychiatrist but not as art."

Comrade Oldham's illustration from music is an example of lack of meaning. It is controversial, it shows things we don't want to see as social beings and it is linked with his defense of obscurantism.

For the People,

J. B. MILES

ART FOR THE PEOPLE

August, 1948

COMMUNIST REVIEW

In his effort to refute Oldham on "that special quality" Comrade Mortier seems to seek a distinction between 'that special quality' and content. But is content not "that special quality"? Is it not a way the idea is conveyed, its appeal or otherwise to "any considerable body of people"? He seems to think that content is some simple hostility to content apart from 'that particular quality'... which gives an emotional and intellectual stimulus. Surely the imperialists would not use the artists if the editors, special correspondents, Liberal and Country spokesman, newspaper cartoons, art writers, etc., did not need to be reinforced. The cartoon is a clear example. In the old days, capable artists were hired to defend the decaying system and, in the new, the direction of the emotional and intellectual stimulus.

Comrade Shaw has entered the discussion on the side of Comrade Oldham and against Comrades Mortier, Fox, Karmin and the valid of Soviet criticism for us in a capitalist environment. He does see weakness in Comrade Mortier's criticism of Comrade Oldham's definition of art. With Oldham he rightly asks that we try to win the artists. With Shaw he deplores the Pravda article "Soviet Fine Arts" (Review, April '48). It is unqualified, out of context, and will drive away artists who are needed.

He does not see that we can struggle in this part of the imperialist world 'against lack of ideas and political direction,' against servility to the decadent system, against obscurantism. Why? If he accepts the call for leadership on the ideological front, in relation to art he accepts this only for the "artistic" part of the question and confines himself to the limitations of the imperialists, the Liberal and Country Party leaders and the right-wing Labourites?

He does not see that the "Soviet art" can develop into a "national" art. He says, "the ideology of the Soviet people on the basis of Socialist realism, can be a guide in capitalist Australia." Can we tolerate the bad conduct of a Party member, of a member of a trade union, of an anti-fascist? No! We strive to correct. Do we tolerate bad work by a tradesman because he holds a Party ticket? No!

We do not set standards of technique for admittance, though we do think members should strive to be good. We can only try to influence the Socialist art of the Soviet Union to ask from artists, who are not sold to the imperialists, that they connect themselves with the ideology of the people who want democracy. And we can ask them to give expression to the forces representing here, and now, the future. We ask that they help those people to be monopoly capitalism, including its arts, as it is, to be defeated for it, and assist to organise them to end it.