

The Socialist Party and Radicalization of the Masses

By James P. Cannon

The ten year period following the end of the war was marked by an integration and growth of the American Communist movement and a concurrent decline in the organization and influence of the Socialist Party. For the past year or so we have been witnessing a reversal of this process. The relation of forces between the two contending tendencies—of revolution and reform—has undergone a change. These are the important facts which merit consideration and analysis.

It profits the revolutionary wing of the labor movement nothing to evade or deny this state of affairs. On the contrary it will do harm, for the radical workers see what is going on before their eyes and are apt to draw false conclusions regarding the efficacy and future prospects of revolutionary ideas. Such indeed is the meaning of the recent noticeable shifting of allegiance of many workers, particularly in the needle trades, who had conscientiously supported the Left wing and the Communist Party for several years. The Communist workers are entitled to an appraisal of the situation.

The advance of Communism in the struggle against the Socialist Party, and to a large extent at its expense, over a ten-year period is undeniable. A few facts: The Left wing gained a majority in the party struggle of 1919 and the Hillquit-Berger machine was able to prevent its capture of the convention only by wholesale expulsions (aided, however, as has so often been the case, by stupidities of the Left wing leadership). Even after the split in 1919, which reduced the Socialist Party membership from 100,000 to less than 20,000, a new Left wing developed within it under the pressure of Communist sentiments in the ranks. This culminated in the second split—a weak one, it is true, with still weaker leadership—of the "Workers Council" group at the end of 1921. The Communists became organizationally stronger than the Socialists despite the terrific handicaps of the Palmer terror and the three-years' period of underground organization. The C. P. extended its operations throughout the country while the S. P. influence and strength were confined to isolated localities, notably New York and Milwaukee. The superior strength and fighting ability of the Communists were graphically demonstrated in the big movements which engaged the attention of the workers: The Labor Party campaign, the organization of the Left wing in the trade unions, the Passaic strike, the Sacco-Vanzetti movement, the needle trades struggles. The collapse of the New York Call, the daily paper of the S. P., just preceding the establishment of the *Daily Worker*, symbolized the waning power of one party and the upward swing of the other.

A Period of Communist Growth

Over that entire ten-year period our party continued to win recruits, individually and in groups, from its Socialist rival, with no shuffling in the other direction. The tides in those days swept out of the S. P. and into our ranks with such eminent pillars of present day Communism as Engdahl, Schneid, Olgin and almost the whole Freiheit staff, not to speak of Kruse, who has begun to drift away by way of the Lovestone detour. Scott Nearing left the S. P. in 1923 and joined the C. P. in 1926. Weisbord, who became justly renowned as the Communist organizer of the Passaic strike in 1926, had been the Secretary of the Young Peoples Socialist League and a campaigner for La Follette in 1924. All of these people, and many others who could be mentioned, were, in one sense of the word, weather-cocks indicating the way the wind was blowing.

Now, after ten years of stagnation and decay, the Socialist Party is showing manifest signs of a revival, partly at the expense of the C. P. The facts which demonstrate this trend are as incontestable as are the reasons which explain it. The greatly increased Socialist vote in the recent New York municipal election, while the Communist vote was reduced to insignificance is one of these signs. The re-establishment of the Right wing unions in the needle trades is another. The increased recruitment of new members is a third sign. (For example, the report of the secretary at the latest meeting of the National Executive Committee claimed more members enrolled in 1929 than in the whole five preceding years). Socialist influence in the labor movement and renewed activity in the

general trade union movement are a fourth sign. The reformist Socialist Party confronts the revolutionary Communists in 1930 as a stronger foe than at any time since the split in 1919.

II

Weather-cocks also reflect the new situation. The first of these was Schneid, president of a Chicago local of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers union, who came to us from the S. P. on the tide of Communist influence in the union in 1922. Last year the reaction carried him back to the S. P. A recent convert to reformism is Hendin, once a member of the C. E. C., who demanded "armed insurrection"—nothing less—at the first underground convention of our party in 1920. (He overestimated the "radicalization" at the time.) There are many others less prominent travelling the same path; one in particular named Streit, who led a squad of Stalinists to break up a meeting of the Communist Opposition in Philadelphia less than a year ago.

The Course of Lovestone's Faction

Besides those individuals who desert Communism and pass over directly into the reformist camp of the S. P.—and more significant—are those who have started on an indirect route, by stages, to the same place. Speaking from the standpoint of political logic—which is decisive—and disregarding personal intentions—which are not—this is the destination of the Lovestone faction. We do not see any ground for the permanent existence of a political party half-way between Communism and reformism which is the sum and substance of Right wing wisdom. The example of the 2-1-2 International and all similar national groupings excludes such a prospect. That Lovestone and Wolfe understand this as well as anyone, cannot be doubted. The *Forward's* estimate of Lovestone's present "work" as the "most useful he has ever done for the working class" is, from their standpoint, a quite intelligent judgement.

It ought to be easily understood why Lovestone and Wolfe cannot proceed directly to their political destination. Conscientious worker-Communists, revolting against the stupidity and brutality of the Foster regime have been caught in Lovestone's trap. Deception and maneuver are necessary to keep these workers together on a graduated reactionary course. Lovestone and Wolfe need time, but they are known for speed and they are making headway. They have already succeeded in leading their followers to Brandler and his program of "National Communism" without a centralized International. They have already translated "Socialism in one country"—the slogan under which they expelled us from the party—into "Communism in one country". This is progress enough for six months. The rest will follow.

III

A number of factors contribute to the phenomena of a Socialist Party revival after ten years of retrogression. The most important is the beginning of a "radicalization" of the workers about which so much is being written these days. The fearfully accelerated exploitation involved in the development of industrial technique which goes by the name of "rationalization" plus wage-cuts, plus swelling unemployment and its attendant horrors, stimulates a labor discontentment which is beginning to grope for expression. It is of decisive importance to have a precise estimate of the character and degree of this discontent. In this field nothing is helpful but actual facts. In the light of such facts there is no ground whatever for the assumption that this "radicalization" of the American workers has anything approaching immediate revolutionary implications, or that the masses are ready for Communist leadership. So far it is possible to speak of tentative movements in the worker masses as "radicalization" in a strictly defined and limited sense. The traditional lack of class consciousness of the American workers, and their specific indifference to social questions as they record it on every occasion (the elections, for example) absolutely preclude the attempt to fit them into any European or world formula of "radicalization". This term can be used intelligently only on an American scale, in comparison with the recent years of "prosperity"; and then only with the reservation that this "radicalization" is shown in its

first stages, as symptoms of deeper movement to come.

The Strike Barometer

This is the only possible conclusion which ascertainable facts will allow. Take the record of recent strikes, always a good barometer of working class militancy. Exact figures of strike movements over a period of years are not at hand at the moment, but the general outline is well known. The textile workers' strike in the South, the sporadic strikes of auto workers and similar outbursts certainly show an awakening mood of the workers involved. But altogether they have so far involved only a few thousand workers, a number in no way comparable to the hundreds of thousands who took part in the great strike movements in coal and steel and on the railroads in 1919 and 1922. Moreover, the responsiveness of the workers generally all over the country, to these strikes was negligible. The elections, another yardstick of proletarian class development, show a Communist debacle, a Socialist gain and a reactionary victory. The various political demonstrations organized by the Communist Party have yet to show serious working class support. They are real "Communist" demonstrations in the sense that only Communists take an active part in them. It is self deception to represent curious spectators as participants in these actions. The unemployment movement shows promise but is, as yet, only in its initial stages.

The most pronounced expressions of the symptoms of radicalization of the workers have been through reformist channels. Such is the meaning of the increased socialist vote insofar as it came from the workers; of the general revival of S. P. influence among the workers; of the appearance of "progressive" movements in the trade unions under S. P. leadership. Such is the real explanation of the fact that thousands of workers in the needle trades are turning to the reorganized Right wing unions. The signs of Socialist Party revival appearing simultaneously with the beginning of working class radicalization is no contradiction. It appears so only to those who grossly exaggerate the extent of the radicalization process and attempt to substitute noisy and flamboyant proclamations for actual moods of the masses. They cannot reconcile these imaginary revolutionary moods with a growth of reformist influence and they try to dispose of the latter by ignoring or denying it. The refusal to see things as they are has always been a fool's dangerous game. Nobody, least of all revolutionaries, ever yet won a war against facts. But this is precisely the whole military strategy of the Foster generals.

IV

A second reason for the recent prosperity which has overtaken the long insolvent firm of Hillquit and Company, bound up with the symptoms of labor radicalism which the capitalists see as clearly as we do and which they fear as much as we welcome, is the patronage of the liberal wing of Capitalism. The more farsighted elements of American capitalism, profiting by European post-war experience, fear a revolutionary influence on a radicalized working class and wish to prepare a buffer against it in advance. For this purpose they are not unwilling to "build up" the liberalized Socialist Party of which they have no fears whatever. The "good press" which the S. P. received in the New York municipal campaign, including the direct support of several papers, had far deeper implications than a mere gesture of protest against the crudities of Tammany Hall. The New York papers were helping to prepare a safety valve before the social boiler has begun to steam.

On its part, the gaining of this capitalist patronage has been facilitated by the deliberate movement of the Socialist Party to the Right. It has spared no effort to establish respectability and harmlessness to the existing social order. It is more and more becoming the haven of inoffensive liberals as well as the shield of labor reactionaries such as the Black Hundreds in the needle trades. Norman Thomas, as spokesman who makes no pretense of Marxism, is a perfect symbol of this metamorphosis of a Party which once proclaimed in words always, and some times in deed, the doctrine of the class struggle.

V

A third important factor which has aided the Socialists is the crisis in the

Communist Party and the incompetent leadership by appointment, which is made to order for Socialist progress at Communist expense.

The Party crisis which grows deeper from day to day has had a profound effect on the radical workers. Without understanding the principle issues, they see only the splits and get an impression of disintegration and decay. They see a once formally united party appearing as three separate factions, each publishing its own organ. In such circumstances the official assurances of "unity" sound to them like a scared boy whistling in the dark. The recruiting power of the movement is paralyzed and thousands of party members fall away in discouragement and despair. Some of them have become victims of reformist illusions—a fate for which they have been prepared by the reign of opportunism in the Party and in the Communist International.

The Fosterite Contribution to the S. P.

The incredible weakness of the appointed leadership, which piles blunder on top of blunder in a vicious system, robs the party of its opportunity to plunge forward on the basis of the new trend in the working class and thus facilitates the game of the reformists. The substitution of noise for thought and vituperation for argument—the political method of Foster and Company—hurts nobody but the workers' vanguard and is grist to the S. P. mill. Many of the new recruits of the S. P. are Foster's contribution to Hillquit.

It is quite the fashion these days for the Party overseers to remind the workers of the overwhelming importance of the "leadership" they are receiving, like a gift, as it were, from the skies. The idea appears in the Party press again and again in the most offensive and patronizing manner. Leadership undoubtedly has a great importance in the proletarian struggle. But it works both ways, and in struggling this question the bureaucrats of the day are only helping, unwittingly, to furnish an explanation of Communist defeats and Socialist victories. An ignorant and corrupt leadership, such as now afflicts the party, can deal the heaviest blows against the cause of the workers' vanguard, and is dealing them. Looking back over the ten years record of the Party, with its ups and downs, its often sad experiences with leaders who have come and gone, one can say with complete assurance that history—insofar as it takes note of the matter—will sustain the judgement, that the present leadership of the Party is the worst it ever had. We say this without forgetting any past experience at any stage of the Party's evolution. The Foster regime has all the stupidity of the Hourwich group without their principle, and the corruption of the Lovestone group without their intelligence.

The Communist workers, staggering under defeat after defeat in times when progress ought to be the rule, will do well to take the usurping bureaucrats at their word when they urge them to remember the decisive importance of leadership. The first conclusion they will come to after a serious consideration of this question will be the necessity of overthrowing the present leadership and organizers of defeat. They will find—since the American bureaucrats are simply the appointed agents of the Stalin E. C. C. I.—that the first steps in this direction will lead them toward participation in the great international struggle over the foundation principles of Communism which the Bolshevik-Leninists are defending against the new revisionists. The disintegration of the American Communist movement is bound up with an international situation and cannot be isolated from it. A real fight against this disintegration can be conducted only under the banner of the International Opposition, for that is the banner of Communism.

VI

The spectacle of Socialist Party advancement and Communist retrogression at a time when there are many signs of a new upward trend of working class activity are transient phenomena based on illusions of the workers, cleverly exploited by the reformists, and misleadership and internal crisis in the Communist movement. In the temporary fluctuation in the class struggle there is no cause for alarm, to say nothing of despair in the revolutionary ranks. The ultimate victory belongs to Communism, but there is no law that it will proceed to this victory on a straight ascending line.

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