

Character and Limits of Our Faction

Lessons from Recent International Experiences of the Opposition

By James P. Cannon

The American movement is condemned by its position, geographically, and politically to lag behind events in the International. This has been demonstrated with an almost arithmetical precision during the entire decade of the existence of the Comintern. The developments in the Russian and West European Parties have always been registered in our own—a few years later. This was the case regarding the crisis in the Russian Party and the Comintern. We were one of the latest detachments of the International Communist Opposition to take definite shape in the open just as the Lovestone group is a somewhat belated reinforcement in the rear of the International right wing. Neither of these American factions, however found its International connection by accident. We were "prepared by the past" for our place under the banner of the International Left Opposition. Lovestone and Co. served their apprenticeship and became journeyman opportunists, qualified for union with Brandtner, in the American Party struggles.

The protracted period of our gestation as a faction on the line of the Bolshevik-Leninists has not been without compensating advantages. The rich experiences of the International struggle were realized for us, as it were in advance, and we have been able to build on their foundations. This insured for us a clearer perspective and tactical line.

On the one hand our deductions from International experience enabled us to avoid a false attitude toward the Party and an over-ambitious program for the creation of a new one; on the other hand they were a shield against the capitulation panic. This sickness, which periodically attacked the Opposition movements in the other countries, was never a problem for us. Three or four weak and inconsequential people at the most, who found themselves in our ranks by mistake, denounced themselves as renegades as soon as they found that membership in the Opposition meant a hard fight.

That was all. One strives with difficulty to recall their names—so little influence did they exert on our cause.

Internationalism our Touchstone

This careful attentiveness to International development which has served us in such good stead all along, should mark our deliberations now as we prepare to raise our struggle to a higher ground. In contrast to the opportunists, Internationalism is the touchstone of our faction. But this does not assure for us the automatic assimilation of International experience. Continuous study of our problems in their international aspect is necessary now as before if we are to draw the correct inferences. Recent experiences in the International movement, particularly in Germany and France, should be the occasion for study and discussion in our ranks. And from this must follow a firmer consolidation of our ideological position and a strengthening of our tactical line in the struggle for the proletarian sections of the Party and Left wing.

In the light of recent events in the camp of the International Left three questions present themselves with especial insistence. They are: 1. The character and limits of our faction; 2. Our attitude toward the Party and the Party bureaucrats; 3. Our attitude toward the Right wing. Developments in the American Party since our National Conference also serve to push these questions into the foreground.

We proceed from the point of view that the crisis in the Comintern arises from the reaction against the October revolution and the weakening of the position of the revolutionary movement on an International scale. This crisis has split the Comintern into three factions, and the character of these factions becomes clearer every day. The issues were obscured for a long time. The exceptional position of the official Centrists, their monopoly of the apparatus and of unlimited material resources, gave them unprecedented opportunities for suppres-

sion, falsification and corruption. These methods were utilized to the limit. "Six years were necessary," says Trotsky, "in order to bring the weightiest questions and differences out of the bureaucratic underworld into the world arena." But political logic is stronger than bureaucratic machinations. It has forced the ideas, and the struggle over them, into the open.

This struggle for us is a struggle for the October revolution and for the principles embodied in it and in the first four Congresses of the Communist International. It is a principle fight for the foundations of Leninism. The International Left wing alone defends these positions. That is the reason, and the only reason, we were expelled by the bloc of the Right wing and the Centrists. It is obvious that such a fight can be ended only with victory.

The question then arises: how can this fight be waged successfully?

The answer is: in the first place, by a clear and definite principle line on all questions; in the second place, by the firm

organization of a faction on the basis of principle; and, in the third place, by an intransigent struggle for these principles under all circumstances and through all fluctuations in the movement. Lenin taught these lessons positively—through the long struggle and final victory of the Bolsheviks by these methods; the German Leninbund has taught them negatively—through its disintegration and degeneration by the rejection of them.

The Left wing is not a Party but a faction fighting to win the Party. The Leninbund stumbled on this question. Mistaking the corrupted bureaucrats for the proletarian masses in the Party ranks it set out toward the formation of a new party. In order to bet numbers quickly it assembled heterogeneous elements. Instead of defining and sharpening its principle line it blunted it. The Leninbund admitted people who had all kinds of "grievances" against the Party but had no common basis in principle. It maintained relations with anti-Marxists and speculated on a bloc with

« The Case of Roy Stephens »

The assault upon the former Boston organizer of the Party and present adherent of the Lovestone faction, Roy Stephens, by a Central Committee directed slugging squad, adds another black page to the list of Fascist attacks by which the Stalinist regime in the movement threatens to discredit Communism for years in the eyes of the whole working class. The beating up of Party political opponents, organized onslaughts upon public meetings, burglarizing private homes and robbing documents, are essentially fascist methods, and there is little if anything to distinguish them when they are used by black-shirts or Stalinists.

Tactics Copied from Fascism

Indeed, it is from the gruesome chapters of fascism that all of these methods have been copied by the Stalinist usurpers and introduced as an alien body into our movement. The whole Communist movement fought these methods when the desperate yellow socialists and A. F. of L. fakers applied them in the trade unions in order to stem the tide of progressive and Left wing influence. The same tactics deserve not one ounce more of approval when they are applied by the Stalinist bureaucracy against any of the political groups in the movement be they of the Left wing or the Right wing. These methods bring only the most negative results. They are a contemptible abuse of what little "power" the Party bureaucrats have at their command.

We condemned these methods when they were first used against our group. We do not forget for an instant that the first faction to use them was the Lovestone faction itself. It was that group which first organized bands of hoodlums to break up the mass meetings called by us. It was that group which first burglarized a private residence which temporarily housed our office, and stole our files and documents (which they have yet to return). It was that group which sent armed tough guys to beat up our comrades when they attempted to sell the Militant at meetings or in front of Party buildings. It was that group—all these deeds, of course, in active collaboration with the Foster faction—which first established the "theory" that our meetings are to be disrupted in the same sense that monarchist meetings are to be attacked!

We condemned those methods when applied against us. We condemn them now when there are still instances of them. We condemn them equally when the Party bureaucrats use them against the Lovestone faction or any of its supporters.

We are not very much interested in Stephens personally. We know him only

as an irresponsible person, a man with little or no principles in the movement, a careerist whose services are very easily purchased in a factional struggle. We know further that Stephens himself, while district organizer of the Party in Kansas City, tried to terrorize the Party members against "fraternizing with the Trotskyist counter-revolutionaries". We know that Stephens himself, while district organizer of the Party in Boston, organized, just a little while ago, a thugs' assault upon a Lovestoneite meeting there where Ben Gitlow, his newly-found leader, was the principal speaker.

Nor are we very much convinced by the virtuous protests of the Lovestone leaders, and their moral indignation. We have yet to see their paper condemn the deportation of comrade Trotsky. We have yet to see them condemn the imprisonment and exile of thousands of Oppositionists in the Soviet Union. We have yet to see them condemn the atrocious murder of comrade Jacob Blumkin, and the recent assassination of two more Oppositionists by Stalin, beside which the attack upon Stephens looks like an insignificant incident. These are questions to which Lovestone must still reply.

Away with Fascist Tactics!

But Lovestone's past and present attitude neither justify nor diminish the enormity of the Stalinists' crimes. Their continuation will rob the whole movement of its great moral and political power to fight the same crimes when they are practiced against the Left wing by the reformists and reactionaries. They will alienate the workers of our movement and make it hateful for them. They are a manifestation of political and theoretical impotence. They pervert the whole conception of the historically progressive value of violence in the class struggle, degrading it into the reactionary weapon of a fear-stricken clique. These fascist methods must be exposed and condemned. They must be burned out of the movement, and those who advocate and practise it eliminated with them.

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the Right wing against the Party. The result: a false attitude on fundamental questions, the steady decline of a promising proletarian movement, a miserable degeneration culminating in a split.

The lesson for us in this event is the organization of our faction on principle lines only. Our strength as a faction, is our platform. Numbers will follow from that, not precede it. The Right wing attacks this insistence on close principle unity as "sectarianism". That is because their aims are different than ours. Opportunism has always made allowance for all kinds of divergent tendencies—except the proletarian revolutionary tendency. Lovestone freed by his expulsion from obligations to Communist tradition, is appealing for recruits on this basis. Anyone can join the Right wing and still "have the right to think and freedom to 'express' themselves" one way or the opposite. This is the Right wing "inducement" to prospective members.

We can have nothing in common with these conceptions. We stand for Party democracy because a living party can determine its united will only through democratic forms. But the democracy we advocate is a centralized democracy, that is to say, a form for a Party of action, not a mere discussion club for the exchange of ideas. A Party of action, thus governed, must have definite organization limits. These limitations have a double application for a faction.

The Limits of a Faction

Lenin prescribed strict limits of principle for membership in the Party, and still narrower limits for a faction. The sneers of the "Revolutionary Age" against the "sectarianism" of Trotsky's advice to the members of the Leninbund is characteristic of opportunists. Lenin, in justifying the expulsion of the Otzovists (boycottists) from the Bolshevik faction, elucidated the question as follows:

"As a faction, i. e., as a union of those who think alike in the Party, we cannot work without unity on fundamental questions. To break away from a faction is not the same as breaking away from the Party. Those who have left our faction are by no means deprived of the possibility of working in the Party." (Liquidating the Liquidators.)

The wisdom of this point of view is confirmed by all revolutionary experience. In order for a Party to lead the proletariat to victory it must have a clearly defined program and organization limits. A revolutionary faction must draw still closer lines. Otherwise it will not be able to act unitedly and influence the Party. It will be lost in the current of events instead of helping to shape them. We will not measure up to our historic mission if we forget the lessons.

As a group of Communists convinced of our platform and confident of our future, we have no need to boast of accomplishments or to exaggerate our present influence. We know that the political line will decide and that the numerical ratio at the moment means little in the final analysis. But it is already clear that the Opposition, in spite of the heaviest obstacles, is going forward. In less than a year after our expulsion we succeeded in uniting our forces in a National Conference and adopting a platform. In less than a year since our Conference a new layer of Oppositionists is assembling in the Party. Our unrelenting fight on principle lines is shaping this development. The progress in the next period and our whole future depend on our continued adherence to this intransigent line of struggle.

Our platform is the platform of Leninism. The principled character of our faction and its definite organizational limits are the Leninist methods of organization. The slogan of intransigence in principle questions is the slogan for Bolshevik struggle and victory. The late experiences in the camp of the International Left wing, if properly assimilated, can only strengthen and reinforce our positions on this ground.

From this the question of our future attitude toward the Party and Party bureaucrats, and to the Right wing is easy to decide. These are subjects for subsequent articles.