

The «Left»: Saviors of Reformism in the Socialist Party

By MAX SHACHTMAN

With its customary facility, the Stalinist press has solved the whole problem of the new movement in the socialist party: The "militants" [i. e., the socialist party Left wing under the leadership of Louis Stanley] have come into existence as part of a cunning conspiracy by Hillquit and Oneal to dam the irresistible onward sweep of "mass radicalization". Since it is not with the shallowness of Centrism that we are concerned here principally, but with the pretensions of the "militants" themselves, the analysis submitted by the *Daily Worker* can be dismissed provisionally with the safe prediction that not too much time will have to elapse before a different song is sung. Nevertheless, this movement, which has already created a stir in the socialist party and was numerically so well represented at the recent New York Local convention, calls for an examination into its significance and rôle.

For some time ago now, a spirit of discontent has been growing in the socialist party, particularly among the younger members. The aspiration of the leadership for a dead calm in the party, an aspiration twice buttressed by mass expulsions of Communist workers, is now again encountering an obstacle.

Twice now, the reactionary leadership of the S. P. has encountered resistance from the membership to its course of completing the conversion of the party into the third party of American capitalism. In 1919, the decisive split was consummated between the proletarian, that is, the Communist wing of the movement, and the petty bourgeois, or social democratic wing. At that time, more than half of the membership of the party was expelled in order to insure the domination of the Hillquit, Berger, Gerner, Oneal clique. In 1921, a second wave of Communist support mounted in the socialist party no longer comprising tens of thousands, it is true, but nevertheless contributing some hundreds of workers to American Communism.

THE SOURCES OF THE «LEFT» WING

Since that time, the degeneration of the S. P. has proceeded with a steadily accelerated rapidity. For the workers who were expelled, the leadership substituted a recruitment among the petty bourgeoisie. For the tepid sympathy it was compelled to manifest towards the Bolshevik revolution, it substituted a cold antipathy, a collaboration with avowed counter-revolutionists. It linked its destiny ever more closely with the reactionary requirements of the Gompers, and later, the Green dynasty in the labor movement, and became its direct agent in the struggle against the Left wing movement in the trade unions. At its New York convention, it finally gave formal recognition to the already accomplished fact by striking out of its constitution all mention of the class struggle. The leadership of Debs, which typified the best days of American socialism, gave way to the petty bourgeois liberal direction of Norman Thomas.

From a timid party of class struggle, in fine, the socialist party has become the bold pioneer of class treachery. There is today hardly a reactionary cause in the labor movement that cannot find the explicit or tacit support of the S. P. hierarchy.

This process, in every essential a replica of the development of the international social democracy, encountered no internal resistance up to recently for two principal reasons: firstly, the proletarian wing of socialism was already outside the party and in the form of the Communist party was conducting a frontal attack against the S. P. all along the line; secondly, the decay of the S. P. proceeded parallel to the "de-radicalizing" effects of the years of American prosperity, and was in every sense an adaptation to this prosperity and its short-lived ideologists. The first signs of the depression, and then the heavy blows of the crisis, however, were bound to reduce a reaction to this degeneration in the labor movement as a whole, and in the socialist party as a section of it. The reaction took the form of a discontent with the conservative policies of the leadership; the discontent has been crystallized in the rise of the so-called "militant group" of Stanley-Bright-Coleman-Porter-Schapiro and others.

But this gives only the barest outline of the new movement in the S. P. It has other, more instructive, characteristics. The last decade of Hillquit leadership, that is, of gross class collaboration, has served to discredit the socialist party, and along with it social reformism in general, in the eyes of the class conscious workers of America. To the extent that the latter are politically active, or become politically active, the bulk of them support the Communist movement or incline in its direction. Moreover, the fact that the crisis and the rising class discontent in the country coincided with the

S. P. being stripped of every militant characteristic, has only served to heighten the contrast between labor's need of a class struggle program and reformism's program of submission and betrayal.

The S. P. today cannot even hope to give adequate expression to the discontent of the workers; it does not pretend to lead them in struggle against the offensive of capital. The gap between it and the progressive and revolutionary workers grows wider to the exact extent that the gap between it and the petty bourgeoisie is closed.

To put it in a different form: Just as the deeds of Mueller and Co. have served to discredit social reformism in Germany, and just as the second ministry of MacDonald has accelerated the discredit of social reformism in England, so also—and necessarily on a smaller scale—has the reactionary course of the S. P. priesthood served to discredit social reformism in the United States. And just as the resistance of the social democratic workers and the pressure of the class struggle has produced the Seydovitz group in the German social democracy, and the Leftward development in the I. L. P. in England, so also—and again necessarily on a smaller scale—it has produced the Stanley faction in the American S. P. But in every single case, the object of the leaders of these minority movements has been to rehabilitate social reformism in the eyes of the workers. This incontestable truth is not changed for a single moment by the fact that the workers following them may, and frequently do, have different objects in mind.

What do Maxton and Seydovitz want? They want to set up against the policy of Grzechinsky, who shoots down the Berlin proletariat on May Day, of MacDonald who slaughters India's masses and keeps Britain's in starvation, a policy of social reformism that will be palatable to the dissatisfied workers—but not the policy of revolutionary struggle. And Messrs. Stanley, Bright and Coleman? Playing their rôle on a smaller stage though they do, it is nevertheless the same rôle of Left social reformists, not revolutionists striving towards Communism, but desperate reformists. The S. P. must be dressed up. Instead of uniting with Green and Woll, as Hillquit does, it must "fight in the trade unions"—for the reformist program. The S. P. must not be liquidated into a Deweyist "third party", as Thomas wants, it must be preserved intact and inviolate—as a distinctly social reformist party. That is the only way, according to the "militant" leaders, for the socialist party to "adjust" itself to the "new situation" produced by the crisis. That is the only way to recruit the support of the workers and prevent them from going to the unrealistic Communists. That is the only way to make reformism acceptable to a section of the working class.

WHO ARE THE «MILITANTS»

The Maxtons, Zyromskis, Seydewitzes, and their folio editions like Stanley and Co., are the saviors of reformism. Their "radicalism" is purely conjunctural, like stocks on the market, and it rises and falls with the rise and decline in the fighting mood of the workers. When the latter is at ebb, the Left wing reformists are content to leave the direction of party policy in the hands of the Real-politiker, the old reactionary party statesmen. When it rises, they are aroused by the threat that the workers' movement may overflow the bulwarks of reformism and pour into the ranks of Communism. In the periods of decline, they are the quiet office boys of the Right wing bureaucracy; in periods of working class ascent, of crisis, they are the recruiting sergeants for reformism, the emergency brake on the advance of the workers.

Leonard Bright, who has now become so militant, was the agent of the Gompers bureaucracy in expelling the Communists from the Office Workers Union years ago; McAllister Coleman, another "militant" in the S.P. was (and for all we know, still is) the agent of the Fishwick gang in the Illinois miners union, and in his weekly column of comment in the *New Leader*, always distinguished himself in rabid attacks upon the Communist movement. Stanley, the principal spokesman for the S. P. "Left wing", does not find it incompatible with his "Marxist" position to write a series of laudatory articles on the glistening virtues of the shopkeepers' administration of the socialist party in Reading.

But they are nevertheless conducting a fight for the proletarian dictatorship in the Soviet Union, a fight against Hillquit, Lee and Oneal! Even if that were true, radicalism for export purposes is very cheap: it costs next to nothing to say a

cutting word or two in New York about what MacDonald is doing in India (that's England's funeral), or a good word for what the Bolsheviks are doing in Russia. But it is not true. The Stanley group, despite all the ado that has been made, is a long, long way from fighting for the proletarian revolution in the U. S. S. R. The most casual examination of the "Russian resolution" it introduced at the New York City convention of the S. P., and around which the whole struggle within the S. P. was centered, will suffice to demonstrate the superficiality of this contention.

The resolution is based upon two ideas, the first of which should endear Stanley to the heart of Gannes and the *Daily Worker* instead of earning him so much abuse: (a) the endorsement of the reactionary theory of socialism in one country; (b) the defense of bourgeois democratic rights in the Soviet Union. Startling as our contentions, particularly the first, may sound, it is confirmed by the words of the resolution itself:

"Because we are anxious for the complete realization of socialism in Soviet Russia we look forward to the removal of two obstacles: (a) internal: the cessation of the extermination of minority opinion which is inconsistent with the socialist ideal and blinds workers to the fundamental achievements of Soviet Russia, and (b) external: the immediate recognition of Soviet Russia, the stopping of interference by foreign powers with the industrial plans or developments of Soviet Russia . . . (the five year plan) is the method by which the first attempt is being made in history to create the socialist society within a brief span of years."

DEFENDERS OF BOURGEOIS DEMOCRACY

The creation of a "socialist society within a brief span of years" in backward, agricultural Russia alone, provided only that "interference by foreign powers with the industrial plans or developments of Soviet Russia" is prevented—that is the very essence of the reactionary-utopian idea invented by Stalin in 1924—or rather, not invented, but copied from the teachings of every opportunist leader in the international socialist movement since the days of George von Vollmar. The same idea, advanced by the predecessors of Stanley in the socialist party to prove their radicalism (we refer to Engdahl, Kruse, Trautenberg, Olgin and Co. in 1920-1921), was contemptuously rejected by the Communist International at the time as we shall later show by incontestable documents.

As for the other section of the "militants'" resolution—the resolution which Lovestone declares "very closely approximates a Communist position—it is simply whining defense of the "rights" of the footmen of bourgeois democracy in the Soviet Union, the Mensheviks and the S. R.s. Against the extermination of what "minority opinion" is Stanley protesting? Against the Stalinist repression of the Bolshevik-Leninists, against the persecutions of the Left Oppositionists who are conducting a struggle against the infiltration of Menshevik and bourgeois elements into the structure of the Russian revolution? Of course not! Stanley was the first of the S. P. spokesman to open up an attack upon the "Trotskyists" when we were first expelled from the American party. What he is interested in is a little "freedom" for Russian Menshevism; for the darling of Abe Cahan, Abramovitch; for the unhampered propagation in the Soviet Union of the lofty ideals of bourgeois democracy. How closely this "approximates a Communist position" is one of those Eleusinian mysteries which only a Lovestone would even attempt to elucidate. The position it does approximate is that of the bourgeois radical Nation, which is identical with the Stanley resolution in the three essential points: It is for the five year plan and a chance for the "Russians to try it out"; it is against foreign interference with the "Russian experiment in socialism"; it is for the "cessation of the extermination of minority opinion".

Radicalism for export purposes is cheap, we have remarked, especially cheap when it serves to cover up the demand for radicalism in the "domestic market" so to speak, which is increased by the pressure in the ranks of workers who want a program of struggle and not words alone. The export of radicalism in the face of "home requirements" is a type of "dumping" not limited to these social reformists, it is true, but quite characteristic of them nevertheless.

Under the impulsion of the powerful Leftward swing of the British workers some five years ago, the late and unlamented "Left" leaders of the trade unions, Hicks, Purcell and Cook, also discovered the Sov-

iet Union, eight years after the revolution, it is true, but not too late to use this discovery and the praise of Communism's achievements (in Russia, not in England) as a bulwark against the revolutionary movement in Britain itself. Thirteen years after the revolution, it is discovered and politely recognized by the S. P. "Left wing", which finds its protestations of interest in the five year plan a safe and sane method of buttressing the structure of social reformism. The fact that it would be ridiculous to match the power for good and evil of Stanley and Bright with that of Purcell and Swales does not invalidate the essential appropriateness of the comparison by a hair's breadth. If any further proof for this is required, it can be found in the plaintive commentaries of those who specialize in idealizing this "Left wing"; the Lovestone faction. It is on their "Russian position" that the "militants" are "clearer", says the *Revolutionary Age*. And the is not by accident. On the contrary, it is precisely with this "definitely friendly attitude towards Soviet Russia" that the very "indefinite" attitude towards revolutionary problems in the United States is to be covered up.

(Concluded in Next Issue)

The «Dictatorship» Debate

Close to five hundred workers packed the New York Labor Temple on February 14th, to hear a debate on the subject: "Is a Proletarian Dictatorship Necessary?" between comrade James P. Cannon, representing the Communist point of view in the name of the Left Opposition, and Walter Starrett, editor of the *Road to Freedom*, for the anarchist point of view. The debate was highly successful from every point of view, and the interest with which the workers present listened to the debaters was the main indication of this fact. Starrett made a feeble presentation of the "orthodox" petty bourgeois point of view of the anarchists on "liberty" and "against any kind of state" or the "limitation of individual freedom by any form of coercion". When he was driven to the wall by comrade Cannon's pointed questions, however, he was compelled to admit lamely that an "anarchist revolution" would be compelled to use force to overthrow the ruling class and organize a red army to crush the counter-revolution. Comrade Cannon, who had given a concise presentation of the class nature of the state and the necessity of the proletarian dictatorship as a transition to Communism, pressed his advantage by showing that a red army could be organized and directed only by a centralized power, that is, the proletariat organized as the ruling class. Starrett's superficial endeavor to identify the workers' state with Mussolinian Fascism was thoroughly destroyed by comrade Cannon, who elaborated on the class differences between the two, a little point which the liberal-anarchist debater had simply forgotten. The same fate was encountered by Starrett's attempt to use the Stalinist abuses and deformations of the proletarian dictatorship to bolster up the anarchist position. Comrade Cannon pointed out that it was precisely because Stalinism was weakening the proletarian dictatorship, that it was the channel through which the world and Russian bourgeoisie was seeking to dilute the dictatorship, that the Left Opposition was conducting its struggle for cleansing the movement of Centrism.

The presence of over half a hundred Party members was noted in the hall, and they gave hearty support to the presentation of comrade Cannon. Starrett, by the way, spent a good part of his time in venomous attacks on comrade Trotsky as the "butcher of Kronstadt", but the bulk of the audience was cold to these abusive remarks.

A good deal of Militants and other literature was sold throughout the audience.

☐

CANNON LECTURE IN BOSTON

All Boston militants are cordially invited to attend the lecture arranged for Saturday evening, February 28, 1931, at the I. W. C. Center, 457 Blue Hill Avenue (Grove Hall), Roxbury. Comrade James P. Cannon, of the national committee of the Communist League, will speak on the "Prospects of the New Union Movement," a subject of particular importance to the progressive and Left wing workers. Admission is 25 cents, and tickets can be bought at Shapiro's Bookstore, 7 Beach Street, or at the door. Auspices of the Boston branch of the Communist League (Opposition).