

The Communists and the Progressives

By JAMES P. CANNON

Two years ago when the Muste movement began to take shape in the Conference for Progressive Labor Action we devoted a number of articles to the question of the "progressives" and the Communists in the *Militant*. At that time the Lovestone Right wing held the leadership of the party and—strange as it may seem in the light of later developments—they were repudiating any idea of a united front. The Opposition waged a polemical battle against the official position. We analyzed the new "progressive" movement from a different standpoint and drew different tactical conclusions.

In our Platform and in several special articles and editorials we advocated the policy of the united front toward the new movement. In doing so, we emphasized the fact that the movement of "Progressivism" had a two-sided character. On the one side, we said, it reflected "radicalization of the workers growing within the old unions as well as in the ranks of the unorganized masses." On the other side we defined the rôle of the leaders of the movement as follows: "Their rôle, objectively speaking, is to express this radicalization in words, to harness it in action and to head it off from any real collision with the capitalists and the A. F. of L. machine." We said: "The new movement is a challenge to the Communists for the leadership of the coming fights;" and we advocated the tactic of the united front as the weapon of the Communists. (Quotations from the *Militant*, March 1, 1929.)

The events of the past two years, and especially the more recent developments, have revived interest in this dispute and, incidentally, have confirmed the opinion we expressed in the above mentioned article that the question would remain a live one and take on even greater importance. In our opinion the policy of the Opposition has stood up and could be restated now as the correct line for the Communists. The emphasis, however, must now be shifted to another phase of the question, because the positions of the factions have radically changed.

The Foster faction is on the verge of a big swing to the Right. The Lovestone faction has already made the swing. It is no longer necessary to explain to the Right wing that Communists must not reject the idea of a united front under certain conditions with reformists, including the so-called progressives. They are shouting so loud now for a united front at any price that they recall the Russian proverb which Lenin quoted to people who contradicted themselves: "Don't spit in the well—you may want to drink out of it."

No, it is necessary now to discuss the problem from another angle. Two years ago the weight of argument had to be placed on the tactic of the united front against people who were opposing it in principle. Now we must emphasize the conditions and the limits of the united front. This applies to the Right wing already today, and to the Fosterites—who are swinging to the Right—it will be necessary tomorrow.

There is nothing in the conduct of the pseudo-progressives for the past two years to merit any more confidence than we expressed in our first analysis of their movement. On the contrary, the estimate of them should be written in harsher words of condemnation. And this applies to the entire "progressive" leadership without any exceptions. Every single one of them, from Muste to Howat, has played the contemptible rôle of decoy for the reactionaries. The latest, and most flagrant instance, is the shameful betrayal of the Illinois miners, a betrayal made possible by the so-called progressives who rallied the insurgent miners and led them back into the reactionary camp.

There is good reason to think that the present crisis is preparing a much wider field for the exploration of the progressives and thereby will magnify the problem of the Communist attitude.

The staggering burdens of the crisis are being loaded onto the shoulders of the workers. Millions have been torn away from their fancied security and hurled into the ranks of the unemployed. Millions of others are suffering drastic reductions of their income, by wage-cuts and part-time employment. A wholesale lowering of the workers' living standards is being effected. What result can this have on the minds of the workers?

As we see it, the main effect will be to shatter the illusions which have been the greatest barrier against the organization of a militant class movement. The discontent of the masses will increase by leaps and bounds and will seek for radical expression. And this will not be confined to the period of the crisis. It is perhaps more reasonable to calculate that the crisis represents

primarily a period of mental preparation of the workers for great struggles which will really get under way as the cycle turns toward economic revival.

If phrase-mongering "Left" demagogues have proved to be a disrupting force and a shielding of reaction in the first tentative manifestations of labor insurgency, then in the coming period they will confront the militant labor movement as the greatest menace. How to cope with this menace, how to defeat the attempt to derail the workers' revolt with the empty phrases of fake radicalism, how to strengthen the revolutionists as against the reformists—this is the crux of the problem.

One way to insure defeat is to adopt the ostrich policy of ultra-Left adventurism which the official party has pursued over a period of two years. The complete bankruptcy of these tactics has already been demonstrated. But an even more certain guarantee of failure would be the attitude toward the "progressive" reformists recommended and demonstrated by the Lovestone Right wing—That is, of fusion with Muste and Co. The crudest expression of this policy is represented by Bert Miller who has gone over, bag and baggage, to the C. P. L. A. and is advertising it as the rallying center of the Left wing.

For joining the Muste organization he and his group have been expelled from the Lovestone faction, but at bottom their positions are identical. The conflict between them is more formal than real. The Revolutionary Age advocates a bloc with the C. P. L. A. "for the development of a progressive, a Leftward movement in the trade unions." And in doing so it puts no conditions to the progressives, it does not criticize and expose their actual rôle and warn the workers not to trust them. On the contrary it deliberately misleads the workers into the belief that the division of labor between "Right and Left" in the C. P. L. A. is a conflict in principle, and it holds out the illusion of "a union of the Left forces in the C. P. L. A. with the Communists in the building up of a Left wing movement in the trade unions". (See Gittlow's article in the Feb. 14th issue.)

Such a policy would deceive and disarm the Left wing workers. If Muste and other so-called "Lefts" can be expected to make "a union" with the Communists, why have they organized the C. P. L. A. as "a union" with the reactionaries against the Communists? Why did they support Fishwick and through him Lewis against the Left wing? Why did they support McMahon in the Textile field against the National Textile Workers' Union? Why did they expel Calhoun, the lone Communist or Communist sympathizer, from the faculty of Brookwood College? Was all of this—and

much more of the same which could be mentioned—a preparation for "a union" with the Communists—an evidence of "good faith", so to speak. What is the difference between joining the C. P. L. A. while keeping silent about these damning facts and making a bloc with it while keeping just as silent? There is no serious difference.

At the very best it is the most naive conception of politics to represent, as Gittlow does in his article, that a united front between the Communists and the C. P. L. A. of itself "will hasten the schism between the reactionaries and progressives, the Left and the Right, in the C. P. L. A." Why should it? It is much more apt to hasten the "schism" between those who make such a united front and the standpoint of Communism. For this inference we already have the fate of Miller and his group to show. For the other inference there is nothing to show. And there can be nothing.

The united front, as Lenin taught it, is a means of mobilizing the masses and leading them in the direction of the revolution. It is not a "partnership" with reformists but a form of struggle against them. It does not mean to rely on them but to distrust them. Its value arises from the form in which it is proposed more than in actual agreements, and it is more frequently realized in that way, although agreements can and should be made at times. On this last point the "third period" strategy—which rejects all agreements with reformists is profoundly false and reduces the whole conception of the united front to a meaningless caricature.

From this point of view we think the Communists should attack the "progressive" menace to the awakening labor movement with the proposal of a united front on the concrete questions of the day. This proposal should be made openly and should contain certain stipulations and demands to be complied with before the agreement and as a condition for the agreement. One of these conditions—since we don't take anything on credit—should be the immediate "schism" with all elements tied to the reactionary bureaucracy of the A. F. of L. and the Black Hundreds in the needle trades, the Jewish Daily *Forward*, etc.

In making such a proposal for a united front the Communists should tell the workers plainly that the "progressives" are not to be trusted and that a revolutionary program is the only program from which a real fighting policy in the daily struggle can flow. If the pressure of the workers for radical action is strong enough to compel the pseudo-progressive leaders, or a section on them, to meet our conditions, we will make the agreement and go with them into a common struggle.

Towards a Left Opposition Movement in Great Britain

LONDON.—

The revolt against the bureaucracy of inefficiency which controls the C. P. in this country makes slow progress. The great difficulty with us, lacking a full time organizer, is to make contacts and to discuss the situation—with which thousands of good revolutionaries are disgusted—with Oppositionists in other parts of the country. Our greatest handicap is the lack of anything in the nature of your excellent paper.

However, everything has to have a beginning and we are helped by the fact that the tide is setting strongly in our favour. The party, under the present leadership, is regarded as a joke by its opponents and a tragic failure by its would-be friends.

Nothing is more certain at this time, when great masses of workers are in revolt against worsened conditions, against the "surrender" advice of their leaders, than that the party is helpless and hopeless—that if the workers are to be successful in the new wave of struggle it must be under the leadership of those who, although at present unorganized, will in the future constitute the Opposition in Great Britain.

Who are the C. P. bureaucrats who have brought the prestige of the party so low? And why has it happened?

Harry Pollitt is general secretary of the party. For years this comrade fought a good fight in the Boller-makers' Union, in the Labour Party, and, particularly, in the factory. His stock stood high among the workers, and because he was a good party member, working in the only way that Communists can work if the party and the working-class are to benefit to the greatest possible extent, the party gained in prestige and strength.

In the past few years, Pollitt's real revolutionary work decreased in proportion

as the comforts of "work" at headquarters attracted him. Today the workers know him no more. He sits with the rest in a high chair at King Street, drafting manifestos and voluminous instructions which betray his present lack of understanding of the real needs of the workers, and which, because of their impossibilist nature, have helped to drive thousands of rank-and-file comrades out of the party in disgust, while repelling other thousands of potential members.

Pollitt is no whit worse than his colleagues in the bureaucracy. Will Gallacher, in the war years and the years immediately after, commanded a great following among the engineering and allied workers for his fine work on the Clyde. He became a serious challenger for the leadership of the Engineering Union.

Where does Gallacher stand today? True, he still works hard, but where once he was a leader of organized workers, his "following" now consists of a few unorganized workers whom he addressed at the street corner and in lecture halls. Without disparaging the work on the street corner, it must be obvious to all that work in the trade union movement is the more valuable.

Tom Bell and others also haunt King Street and an occasional street corner to the exclusion of trade union work. Years ago these comrades mattered among the organized workers. Today their names are unknown.

And so the party has suffered. Protests from a rank and file which has always been weak, and so much engrossed in serious work among the masses as to have no time for the problems at headquarters, have nevertheless often been uttered—especially at district conferences—but these have all been "machined" over as ruthlessly as

In the course of the struggle we, of course, will maintain our separate organization, drive them forward at every step and criticize every vacillation and weakness they manifest. We will conceive of it all the time as a temporary agreement which we are ready to break at any moment they betray their promises.

We know—as world-wide experience has demonstrated to the hilt—that most of them will betray. But if we have conducted ourselves properly from the start, allowed ourselves no illusions and created no illusions among the workers, the betrayal will weaken them and strengthen the party. Some of the leaders, and the majority of the workers, who started as progressives, will be swept along with us into the stream of Communism. Most of the present leaders of the Communist parties came through this door and they should be the last to deny that others can do the same.

The Lovestone opportunists regard the united front tactic as something that cannot be applied without an actual agreement of some kind with the reformists. That is why their principal activity consists in sniffing around the back door of some faker or other offering "blocs" which cost the fakers nothing. Witness the deal with Levy (read: Sigman) in the I. L. G. W. U. To mention little things with big ones, Weisbord also offered to "educate" us along this line.

That conception is wrong. It derives from Brandier, not from Lenin. The validity of the united front tactic does not at all depend upon formal agreements with reformists. It depends only on such a formulation of the demands and conditions that they are comprehensible to the workers as the necessary basis of struggle for their burning demands. The question whether the reformists accept the conditions does not depend on their wishes. They are weather-cocks. The decisive factor is the pressure of the masses. From this it follows that the most important aspect of the united front tactic is not "negotiations" but widespread and intelligently-conducted agitation.

Under such circumstances the refusal of the reformists to agree to our proposals only serves to unmask them and to rob their demagoguery of its power to influence the workers. On the other hand it provides the basis to extend and give point to our work among the masses for the practical program embodied in our united front proposals. We still appear before the workers as the advocates of the united front and the result, no less than in the case of a formal agreement, is to widen the mass movement and strengthen the influence of the Communists within it. And that is the real purpose, and the justification, of the policy of the united front.

though they had been uttered in the Labour Party.

What is to be done? The machine is strong. It has the support of Stalin and the C. I.

But if the revolution is to live in Britain—unless Fascism is to gain the following of millions of disgusted and disheartened proletarians—the bureaucrats must be removed.

Under their control, the *Daily Worker*, which at this moment should have a circulation of 50,000, has in fact fewer than 5,000 subscribers and much fewer readers. The party, which once certainly had 20,000 members exerting influence out of all proportion to its numbers, has now fewer than 500 active adherents.

This at a time when millions of workers are on the verge of struggle and when thousands of militants who might lead the struggle are helpless to do so because the party has become a joke and revolutionaries have no other organizations.

We have a big job. But we're getting on with it.

SPARTACUS.

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

Pressure of space compelled us to omit from this issue a considerable amount of timely material which will be included in the next issue of the *Militant*. The forthcoming number, therefore, will contain an article on the recent developments in the Soviet Union, the continuation of the article revealing the state of affairs in the Hungarian Benefit Society, the "Young Vanguard" page devoted to the problems of the working youth, in addition to many other articles on events of importance to the revolutionary and labor movements.