

MILITARY POLICY OF THE PROLETARIAT

Speech By James P. Cannon At Chicago Conference of SWP

(The following is a stenographic report of the main speech made by Comrade Cannon at the September 27-29 Plenum-Conference of the Socialist Workers Party at Chicago.)

Our final word in formally terminating our deliberations today is devoted to the history of our greatest teacher and comrade and our most glorious martyr. It is the proposal of the National Committee that we all stand for a moment in silent tribute to the memory of Comrade Trotsky.

We meet for the first time without him. I am sure that as we stand for a silent minute our common thought will be joined as all. We all realize most profoundly that, whether we are quite grown up to it or not, we now face the appalling responsibility of leading and organizing the world movement of proletarian emancipation without the direct aid of the man who shaped and guided our movement, who inspired us, who guided us up and made men of us and prepared us for this great struggle. It is up to us now to show that we have really learned what has been taught to us so patiently and so thoroughly. It is for us to take the tasks that have been placed in our hands and see these no more as apprentices but as full-fledged journeymen.

We have confidence that we do do this because we have been left the greatest heritage that any political grouping in the history of the world was ever given. Never before did the workers' vanguard have such complete and thorough preparation, in a theoretical and programmatic way as we have received. Especially in the past eleven years since Comrade Trotsky was exiled from the Soviet Union, eleven years which in history events, we have had from day to day and from year to year the aid of his great Marxist logic. With his aid and guidance we have unraveled the mysteries of this epoch and found in every case the strategic and tactical road that leads the proletarian movement to higher ground.

We not only have now the task of leading the movement in

this country. We also have to consider a great international responsibility. In the nineteenth century, nearly seventy years ago, Marx and Engels transferred the center of the First International to the United States. Their aim was that, to speak, a symbolic indication of the future international leading role of America. By a combination of circumstances the prophetic gesture of our great masters has finally been realized by concrete reality. The main political center and organizational base of the Fourth International, which is destined to complete the work begun by the First International of Marx and Engels, is in truth lodged here in the United States in the custody of those comrades who are gathered here and those whom they represent in all sections of the country.

A combination of circumstances, rather than any special merit of our own, has imposed upon us this international responsibility. First of all, we were fated to have the greatest amount of freedom for the open and broad development of our movement. While our nations floundered in one country after another fell under the heavy shadow of persecution, were stifled and repressed, we here in America have had now twelve years of uninterrupted propaganda work. We alone of practically all sections of the Fourth International were fortunate in beginning our activities with new and unprejudiced people. We carried over into the new movement of the Fourth International some substantial and experienced cadres who had been tested and who had learned in the Communist movement since 1918, and even before that. Our movement was thus prepared by its past and by these fortunate circumstances to establish an uninterrupted continuity between the movement of the present day and that which preceded it. All these things taken together have equipped and prepared us for the role which we must now play in aiding the further development of the Fourth International in all countries.

OURS IS THE RESPONSIBILITY!

This movement is primarily the creation of Comrade Trotsky. He was responsible above all others for formulating its program and assembling its cadres on an international scale. But within the last few years our party has come to the front and played an increasingly important role. More and more Comrade Trotsky came to rely on us as the strongest pillar of the Fourth International. More and more the comrades in all parts of the world came to look at the combination of Comrade Trotsky and the American section as the main guarantee of stability in the leadership of the international party. And now, after the death of Comrade Trotsky, we can be sure that the comrades in all parts of the world—in China, carrying on their work in daily danger of their lives; in the comrades imprisoned and in concentration camps in Germany; in illegality in France; in England; in Australia; in South America; in the Soviet Union; everywhere—they are now looking to the American section, in the Socialist Workers Party, to grow up to the level of its historic responsibility and assure the continuous functioning and development of our international movement. That puts a still greater responsibility upon all of us.

We cannot lag any more. Everyone of us, I am sure, in the past years felt that if we erred, we had the assurance that we could be corrected by someone wiser than we. All of us, including myself, felt that if we slipped or slumped a little bit now and then, our levity would be compensated for by the striking energy of the Old Man. We permitted ourselves more than one luxury. That we cannot indulge ourselves any more. The burden is on our shoulders. We must carry it. We must give the movement more time than ever in its history. It is discipline in faithfulness and in efficient work.

We must at a time of a great change in the world. Before our eyes, almost without our realizing it, there has been brought about a profoundly new world situation. A new period has opened up. The essence of the new situation is that capitalism in its unprecedented decay, in its death agony, has passed over completely from the relative stability and relative peace which characterized

it as a growing and healthy social system into a state of permanent crisis, and the permanent crisis is now expressed in permanent war.

At the mass meeting last night I mentioned the new and significant development of the German-Italian-Japanese pact. The announcement of this pact signifies above all other things that the war in Europe is due by an extension into Asia, Africa and into the Western Hemisphere of the Americas. There is no prospect whatever for any more considerable periods of peace in the capitalist world. Just conjectures for a moment that some kind of peace could be effected in the European war. Nobody could believe that this would be a peace of any stability. It would only be a preparation for a new war of continents, of hemispheres, of the whole world. If a sudden, smashing victory of Hitler should enforce a peace with England, as was the case with France, no one would believe this would be the end of the war. If a formal peace should be declared and there should be a full, durable which there should be no war, it would only be an interlude.

We are preparing—our imperialist masters are preparing—night and day to challenge Hitler for world dominion. And Hitler, Mussolini and the Japanese imperialists are preparing to meet that challenge. The solution can only be a whole epoch of uninterrupted revolution and war. The proletarian, which is the sole power capable of lifting humanity out of this bloody mess, must face this fact. It cannot indulge in any more daydreams about the peaceful solution of the social problem. The workers' movement was dominated by this illusion for decades, for generations. It was thought and felt that day by day work of organizing trade unions, building reformist parties, voting votes, gaining some social legislation—it was felt that along these lines, working from year to year and from decade to decade, they could gradually improve the conditions of the masses and slide over peacefully, without violent collisions or shocks, into a new social order called socialism.

MILITARY MEANS ARE NOW DECISIVE

The workers can indulge in no such daydreams any longer because the world is on fire with war and militarism. The one big conclusion the proletarian vanguard must draw is that all great questions will be decided by military means. This was the great conclusion insisted upon by Comrade Trotsky in his last few months of life. In his letters, in his articles and in conversations he repeated this thesis over and over again. These are new ideas. The characteristic feature of our epoch is increasing war and universal militarism. That imposes on us as the first task, the task which dominates and shapes all others, the adoption of a military policy, an attitude of the proletarian party towards the solution of social problems during a time of universal militarism and war.

The prospects of the United States, remaining at peace are absolutely zero. You have before you the draft of our resolution on military policy. It has been printed in the internal bulletin and discussed in the branches for the past two months. We have elaborated in this resolution our conception of these new problems and tasks. In the very beginning we take up the question of America's participation in the war. It is completely absurd to imagine that there is some special policy—some legend—can make it possible for the strongest imperialist power in the world to escape participation in the struggle for the imperialist domination of the world. Nobody believes in this possibility except a few middle-headed pacifists. And when I say middle-headed pacifists I do not mean the bourgeois pacifists. I mean the fools, the people who "being completely yesterday, like the Throatsocialists, the Lovestones, the few religious fanatics.

That wing of the American bourgeoisie going by the name of isolationist are no less aggressive, no less military minded, than the wing which wants intervention right now in the present war.

The Chicago Tribune strongly criticizes the Roosevelt policy only because they have a different approach to the war. They think we should begin the struggle of the struggle of American imperialism for world dominion, by conquering first the Western Hemisphere and ascending next to the East by way of a war against Japan, postponing the clash with Hitler till a later time. The more frightened, the more conscious and I am sure, the strongest section of the American bourgeoisie, who are called interventionists, believe that we must begin the struggle for world dominion by intervention in the European war. What divides the two camps at this time is only a matter of strategy. Now that they are confronted by an open military alliance of Germany and Japan their differences can easily be reconciled.

The only question will be how soon and at what point to begin open intervention. As a matter of fact, in all except the form-

ulation of the situation, we are intervening in the European war now as much as we can. We are sending unlimited supplies of military materials to Europe. In my opinion the only reason we are not sending troops is that there isn't any place to land them. The Wall Street heroes and their political lackeys overlook the European situation. They under-estimated the resistance and weakness of the war-torn democracies of Europe on the one hand and the military strength of Hitler on the other. They wanted to hang onto the profits to be made by the fascists. Nothing remains now but England, which has no room for troops, and there is a growing opinion among American capitalists and military experts that England itself is a lost cause.

When American participation in the war finally begins it will be a secondary question. The very fact that we have appropriated approximately fifteen billion dollars in one year for military expenditures before any war was formally started, that we have instituted peacetime conscription for the first time in history—these facts, far only indicate that the masters of this country are preparing for an explosion of military aggressiveness on a scale never seen in history before. Imperialist America is out to dominate the world. In its path stands Hitler Germany in the West. In its path stands imperialist Japan in the East. The conflict between these imperialist powers can in no case be resolved by diplomacy or good wishes or half measures, but only in all other things are decided in this epoch—by military force.

Now, confronted with these facts of universal militarism and permanent war, that the biggest industry of all now is being to be war, the army and preparation of things for the army—confronted with these facts, what shall the revolutionary party do? Shall we stand aside and simply say we don't agree with the war, it is not our affair? No, we can't do that. We do not approve of capitalist exploitation in the factories. We do not approve of this whole system of exploitation whereby private individuals can take possession of the means of production and enslave the masses. We are against that, but as long as we are not strong enough to put an end to capitalist exploitation in the factories, we adapt ourselves to reality. We don't abstain and go on individual strikes and separate ourselves from the working class. We go into the factories and try by working with the class to influence its development. We go with the workers and share all their experiences and try to influence them in a revolutionary direction.

The same logic applies to war. The great majority of the young generation will be dragged into the war. The great majority of these young workers will think at first that they are doing a good thing. For a revolutionary party to stand by and say, "We



JAMES P. CANNON

can tolerate exploitation in the factories, but not military exploitation—that is to be completely illogical. To isolate ourselves from the mass of the proletariat which will be in the war is to lose all possibility to influence them.

We have got to be good soldiers. Our people must take upon themselves the task of defending the interests of the proletariat in the army in the same way as we try to protect their interests in the factory. As long as we can't take the factories away from the bosses we fight to improve the conditions there. Similarly, in the army. Adapting ourselves to the fact that the proletariat of this country is going to be the proletariat in arms we say, "Very well, Mr. Capitalist, you have decided it so and we were not strong enough to prevent it. Your war is not our war but as long as we are in the mass of the proletariat you will go, we will go too. We will raise our own independent program in the army, as

THE ONLY ROAD TO THE WORKERS

The workers themselves must take charge of this fight against Hitler and anybody else who tries to invade their rights. That is the whole principle of the new policy that has been elaborated for us by Comrade Trotsky. The great difference between this and the socialist military policy in the past is that it is an extension of the old policy, and adaptation of old principles to new conditions. In our conversations with Comrade Trotsky he said he considered the great danger to our movement is pacifism. The spirit of pacifism in our movement is in part due to the left socialist tradition of authoritarianism. In part it is also a hang-over from the past of our own movement. We said and those before us said that capitalism had outlived its usefulness. World economy is ready for socialism. But when the world war started in 1914 some of the parties had the idea that on the agenda stood the struggle for power. The stand of the best of them was essentially a protest against the war.

It did not occur even to the best Marxists that the time had come when the power must be seized by the workers in order to save civilization from degeneration. Even Lenin did not realize the victory of the proletarian revolution as the immediate outcome of the war. Just a short time before the outbreak of the February revolution in Russia, Lenin wrote in Switzerland that his generation would most probably not see the socialist revolution. Even Lenin had postponed the revolution to the future, to a later decade. And a few months later it exploded in all its power in Russia. Ardent revolutionary situations developed in one European country after another.

Trotsky pointed out to us that even such valiant and honest anti-war fighters as Dubs and others who conducted a fight against the war as a protest, but never once did it occur to them that the war was directly posing the question of the struggle for power. This protest against the war had a semi-pacifist character. Our movement was affected by this, especially when it was affected with the petty bourgeois element in the party. You can recall that when we were discussing and arguing with them, the prevailing tendency among them was expressed about as follows: "We want to know, how can we keep out of the war, if the war starts how can we keep out of military service?" They were primarily concerned about the various ways of ending the draft. More than we expressed the idea of escape to Mexico.

A group of horse minority students in Chicago bought a small boat and sailed for Tahiti or some such place to hide out there until the war would be over. While millions of young proletarian youth are on the battle fields getting all kinds of experiences, facing all kinds of dangers, becoming hardened and ready for anything, these heroes will be backing in tropical sunshine and waiting for their day of destiny. I suppose when the time comes to make the revolution these people will probably sail back from Tahiti and say: "Here we are boys, ready to load you." It is not difficult to imagine the answer they will get from the boys who have already selected their leaders in the test of blood and fire.

Only those who go through hell with the soldiers will ever get close to their hearts and be able to influence them. All those with experience in the labor movement know it takes more than fancy speeches to gain influence with the workers. You must be with the workers. And nine times out of ten I think every trade unionist will testify, the best asset you can have is to be a good worker in the shop. If the workers say, "He is the best mechanic among us; he does his full share of the work, not because he loves his boss but because he doesn't want to lead the work on his fellow workers, etc." If the workers say that about a man his influence is transferred over into the mass, and when he gets up to say a word on the union floor he is listened to.

the military forces, in the same way as we raise it in the factories."

We say it is a good thing for the workers even to be trained in the use of arms. We are in fact, in favor of compulsory military training of the proletariat. We are in favor of every union going on record for this idea. We want the proletariat to be well trained and equipped to play the military game. The only thing we object to is the leadership of a class that we don't trust. We don't want indoctrination of the boss as officers in our ranks. Just as we don't want them as officers of our unions so we don't want them in the military forces. We are willing to fight Hitler. No worker wants to see that kind of fascist barbarism over-run this country of his country. But we want to fight fascist rule in leadership that we can trust. We want our own officers—those who have shown themselves loyal to their class, who have shown themselves to be the honest and most loyal men on the picket line, those who are interested in the welfare of their fellow workers. These are precisely the type of people we want as officers. In the period when the whole working class youth is mobilized for war, these are the ones we want at the head of our battalions.

So we simply make our independent demands upon the government. We will join the war as long as the workers do. We will say frankly to the workers in the unions and shops: "We would like to throw over this whole business of capitalist exploitation-militarism as well as industrial-rightism. But as long as you are not ready for that total solution we will join with you right by your side, to protect the mass from useless waste of lives. All that we will do, but we retain our principles—the right to express our opinion day in and day out; that you must not trust the leadership of your enemy class. Don't forget that the government in Washington is a concentrated representative of the same bosses that you have to fight every day in order to live. It is nothing but the Executive Committee of all bosses who, together and individually, act as the exploiters and oppressors of the working class. For we must trust in that bosses' government then you do in the individual bosses at home.

We will fight all the time for the idea that the workers should have officers of their own choosing. That this great sum of money that is being impounded out of the public treasury should be allocated in part to the trade unions for the setting up of their own military training camps under officers of their own selection, that we go into battle with the consciousness that the officer leading us is a man of our own flesh and blood who is not going to waste our lives, who is going to be true and loyal and who will represent our interests. And in that way, in the course of the development of the war, we will build up in the army a great class conscious movement of workers with arms in their hands who will be absolutely invincible. Neither the German Hitler nor any other Hitler will be able to conquer them.

We will never let anything happen as it did in France. These commanding officers from top to bottom turned out to be nothing but traitors and cowards crawling on their knees before Hitler, leaving the workers absolutely helpless. They were far more concerned to save a part of their property than to fight the fascist invader. The myth about the war of "democrats against fascism" was exploded most shamefully and disgracefully. We must shout at the top of our voices that this is precisely what that gang in Washington will do because they are made of the same stuff as the French, Belgian and Norwegian bourgeoisie. The French example is the great warning that officers from the class of bourgeoisie despots can lead the workers only to useless slaughter, defeat and betrayal.

Mostly the same psychology will prevail in the army. A man trained, ready to run—he will never be able to lead the worker soldiers by making a few speeches from his retreat. It is necessary to go with the workers through all their experiences, through all the dangers, through the war. Out of the war will come the revolution, not otherwise. The War Manifesto of the Fourth International declares: "We don't want the war—we are not in favor of the war—but we are not afraid of the war. In this very war we will hammer out the rules of revolutionary soldiers who will lead the struggle."

We must remember all the time that the workers of this epoch are not only workers, they are soldiers. Their armies are no longer selected individuals, they are whole masses of the young proletarian youth who have been shifted from exploitation in the factories to exploitation in the military machine. They will be imbued by the psychology of the proletariat from which they came. But they will have guns in their hand and they will learn how to shoot them. They will gain confidence in themselves. They will be fired with the conviction that the only man who counts in this time of history is the man who has a gun in his hand and knows how to use it.

The great advantage of the workers in their own strength. "Ye are many, they are few," said the poor soldier. All the oppressed masses need is the will to power. All that is necessary to transform this multitude of capitalism into a world of socialism is for the mass of the workers and the poor farmers to get the one simple general idea in their heads that they have the power and it is time now to use it. The capitalist class puts arms in the hands of the working class. That will, in the end, prove their undoing.

Now war, as I remarked in my speech last night, destroys a lot of things that are useful and valuable. It is a terrible overhead coal humanity has to pay for the delay in instituting socialism after capitalism has outlived its usefulness. This delay of the revolution has visited a terrible plague upon mankind that is going to destroy not thousands but millions of human lives. It will destroy great accumulations of material culture that took centuries of human labor to create. As one small illustration take the city of London today. Here is a great city with centuries of accurate and achievements of mankind being pounded to dust. Nineteen consecutive days of bombing, and it stands to reason that the city is already pretty in ruins.

The war destroys a great many things which will take much labor to replace. But war destroys some bad things also. War puts an end to all authority and poses every question point blank. There might have been some in the past for doubt as to how the workers can best solve the social problem. There were whole generations of workers deluded with the idea that the best way was the gradual process, inch by inch trade union and parliamentary struggle. By that method they built up great trade unions and political parties with millions of members and tens of millions of votes. These organizations lacked very imposing in times of peace. They were very important, but what happened to them in these organizations, that hadn't learned how to do anything but pay dues one day and vote the next day? The moment they got one violent military blow they were simply finished. They were designed for peace, not for war.

How can anyone expect reformist politicians and vulgar trade unionists after what happened in Belgium, Norway and France? Millions of people organized, the whole proletariat virtually organized, paying their dues; contracts signed with the bosses; all equipped with full stacks of well-paid officials and business agents in the unions; none of the officers of long stand-

(Continued on Page 2)