

Marxism-Leninism and "American Prosperity"

By William Z. Foster

AT THE PRESENT TIME there is a militant drive on in the Communist Party against Marxism-Leninism, on the grounds that it is essentially Left-sectarian and, as such, unadaptable to American conditions. . . . of this anti-Leninist trend got into the main Draft Resolution for the Convention now before us, which is why the present writer voted against it. This de-Leninizing tendency, expressed in numerous ways, is summed up in the general aim to abolish the Communist Party and to replace it with a so-called political action organization.

The basic premise of this anti-Leninist trend—that Leninism is alien to the United States and unworkable here—is false. By almost four decades of actual experience in the class struggle, Marxism-Leninism, crystallized in the Communist Party and its activities, has proved itself far more adaptable to the American class struggle than have the various other tendencies professedly aiming at Socialism. And this, despite the numerous mistakes that have not surprisingly been made in the application of Marxism-Leninism and also not withstanding the serious governmental and other persecutions to which the C.P. has always been subject.

Even after the heavy losses suffered by the Communist Party under the fierce attack by the Government during the cold war years, the C.P. is still numerically stronger than all the other Left groups put together—Socialist Party, Social-Democratic Federation, Socialist Labor Party, Socialist Workers Party, the Industrial Workers of the World, and the Sweezy and Cochran groups. Besides, over the years, the C.P. has made a record of struggle and achievement that dwarfs those of the other Left groups combined. All this constitutes living proof of the greater adaptability of Marxism-Leninism to class struggle conditions in this country.

THE SOCIALIST MOVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

The United States is notoriously the most difficult capitalist country in the world for the growth of Socialist ideology. This is basically because of the higher living standards of the workers here than in other countries. And the difficulties before Socialism in this country have mounted with the rapid rise of American imperialism and with the considerable wage improvement during the past half century, notwith-

standing several major economic crises in the meantime. Of course, the improvements in the workers' conditions in no way correspond to the fabulous increases in capitalist profits in this period, nor to the enormous growth of the workers' productivity. More than one-half of American families are now living upon a scale 30 per cent below the minimum requirements of the Heller Budget, and the general position of the workers, counting together wages, prices, hours, productivity, and unemployment, has sunk, according to Perlo, from 100 in 1899 to 51 in 1952. Notoriously, the wages of unskilled workers are far below minimal living standards, and the economic conditions generally of the Negro people are shocking.

Such wage improvements as the workers have secured over the years, they have won by endless struggle on both the economic and political fields. At the same time they have also secured a number of other important betterments.

These working class betterments, of course, rest upon very uncertain foundations, due especially to the deepening of the world crisis of capitalism, from which the United States is by no means exempt. They are subject to partial or complete cancellation as a result of imperialist war, fascism, economic crises, high taxes, lost strikes, etc. This we have seen happen time and again, especially in Europe, but also in the United States. All of which goes to emphasize the elementary fact that

only under Socialism are the conquests won by the working class in struggle against the exploiters, both of a fundamental character and secure in their tenure.

THE DECLINE OF SOCIALIST IDEOLOGY AMONG AMERICAN WORKERS

Limited and precarious though they may be, the concessions won by American workers in relentless struggle, although stimulating the growth of trade unionism (from about 900,000 in 1900 to some 17,000,000 now) have undoubtedly tended to dampen down the workers' revolutionary spirit. The workers' proven ability to better their conditions, even if only partly, under capitalism has weakened their receptivity to Socialist ideas, and it has exposed them to bourgeois reformism, notably Rooseveltian Keynesism. Forty years ago, many American international trade unions, state federations, and local councils openly advocated a Socialist perspective, and the Socialist representation at the national A.F. of L. conventions ran up to nearly 40 per cent; but nowadays, hardly a union anywhere in the vast A.F. of L.-C.I.O. organization supports Socialism, and individual voices advocating Socialism in the American labor movement are now fewer than for many years past.

Such a temporary decline in the revolutionary spirit of the workers during the period of the upswing of imperialism in a given country is not unique to the United States.

It has been known elsewhere, notably in Great Britain and Germany.

The United States is now passing through a comparable period, although in a much more exaggerated degree.

In these general conditions of partially improved working class standards, the various Socialist groupings gauge shared by all artists of good in the United States have fared badly during recent decades. Their own errors in policy have, of course, also contributed greatly to their general lack of success in the difficult objective situation. Already by 1900 the Socialist Labor Party, with its narrow sectarian policy, had proved itself utterly incapable of giving advanced political leadership to the working class and had degenerated into a rigid sect. The Socialist Party, for almost 20 years after its birth in 1900, exhibited considerable growth and activity, reaching a membership of over 100,000 and a national vote of 900,000 in 1912. But it soon thereafter began to decline, until now its two wings together—the Socialist Party and the Social Democratic Federation—have only a tiny membership. Among the S.P.'s most costly errors were: its dubious stand in World War I; its chronic anti-Soviet attitude; its illicit alliance with the conservative Gompers-Green trade union bureaucracy; its wrong attitude on the Negro and labor party questions; the abandonment of its progressive vanguard role, etc. The Industrial Workers of the World also made a big surge from 1905 to

about 1920, but in the generally difficult circumstances of the period, it was finally overwhelmed by its mistakes, including anti-politicalism, anti-religion propaganda, dual unionism, excessive decentralization, and other Syndicalist sectarian practices. The Lovestone renegade Rightwing group remained a tiny sect as long as it lasted. As for the Trotskyites, in their several groupings they have been incurably hamstrung by a crippling Left-sectarianism and by a pathological hatred of the Soviet Union and the Communist Party. And the Sweezy and Cochran groups have been basically only discussion groups of intellectuals.

THE RELATIVE SUCCESS OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY

As against this general record of failure of Left-wing groups in the United States during recent decades, the Communist Party has registered, by comparison, a considerable success. It has shown that it possesses distinct elements of growth and leadership in the difficult American situation. During its earlier years, while the other Marxist groupings were floundering about in impotent sectarianism, the C.P. became a real factor in the class struggle and it built up, by the 1940's, a membership of about 85,000. Even now, after the heavy losses suffered by the Party under severe government attack, in the Party's heroic and basically correct fight against the war danger of the cold war years, the C.P. still has more members and

more political vitality than all the other pro-Socialism groups combined.

The fundamental reason for this long record of Communist relative success has been that the Communist Party is a Marxist-Leninist organization. Its liveability and capacity for growth lies primarily in the fighting principles of Lenin with which it has been animated through the years. Among these may be mentioned, not necessarily in the order of their importance, the Party's strong discipline, its practice of self-criticism, its consciousness of its vanguard role, its policy of the united front, and its strong principles of internationalism. Although it often applied very crudely these fundamentally correct Marxist-Leninist principles and policies, nevertheless it was able to demonstrate their basic effectiveness in the American situation. Let us remark a few of them in some detail:

Communist Party discipline, despite the many bureaucratic practices which twisted and distorted it throughout this whole period, has been a powerful force in the life of the Party, one which has been at once the dread of all our enemies and a basic cause of the Party's many successes. The same may also be said of our practice of self-criticism. Although this fundamental Leninist principle has been applied over the years in a very one-sided and inadequate way, nevertheless it has given our Party an inestimable advantage of flexibility and progressiveness over

other Left organizations, which systematically try to obscure their mistakes and shortcomings.

Of especially great advantage, too, for the Communist Party—and one of the basic Leninist principles that have conferred profound vitality upon our Party—has been its conception that the Communist Party must fight at the head of the working class, as its vanguard. This vital concept has also been much distorted in the Party's propaganda and fighting practice; still it is one of the most dynamic reasons why our Party has been able to play such an important role in the class struggle. It has led to the Party's pioneering, over the years, many vital causes of the workers and the Negro people—including the fights for the organization of the unorganized, for unemployment relief and insurance, for the economic, political, and social rights of the Negro people, for the demands of the youth, for the defense of political prisoners, for independent political action of the workers and their allies, for trade union unity, for the struggle against fascism, and, in the last years, in its brave struggle against war—in all of which fields, as well as in various others, the Communist Party has displayed unequalled initiative and militancy, and has kept always in the front line of the class struggle. This has been an invaluable advantage for the Party.

Still another of the many fundamental policies, especially associated with the name of Lenin, that have helped to demonstrate the superior

vitality and effectiveness of Marxism-Leninism as against the policies of other Left parties and groups in the United States, is that of the united front. Here again, in the application of this great policy almost every imaginable error has been made during the Party's long experience. Nevertheless, the policy has been basically effective in the especially difficult objective and subjective conditions in the United States. Upon innumerable occasions, with very substantial success, the Communists have been able to develop effective cooperative action with other progressive forces. Some of the many of these movements were the broad campaigns of the Trade Union Educational League in the early 1920's; the big Farmer-Labor Party activities of the same period; the wide united fronts on the Negro question in the 1930's; the joint union election campaigns with progressives in the Needle trades, Machinists, Carpenters, Miners, and other trade unions in the same decade; the long cooperation with the Center group in the C.I.O. during the building and functioning of that organization throughout the 1930's and 1940's. In fact, almost every success ever won by the Party throughout its entire history has been upon the basis of the Leninist united front policy.

To mention only one more of the many Leninist policies that have contributed to the relative success of the Communist Party, has been its militant policy of internationalism,

particularly its active support of the developing Soviet Union and, in later years, of People's China and the European People's Democracies. This internationalism, by keeping the Party in close sympathetic touch with the advance of Socialism all over the world, gave the Party a unique and powerful advantage in attracting to its ranks the most advanced workers. This took place in spite of numerous errors made in the practice, particularly the maintenance of an uncritical attitude towards the U.S.S.R. and the other Socialist countries. The Party's over two decades of affiliation to the Communist International, although not without certain negative aspects, was also invaluable in developing the Party's ideology, its fighting quality, its leading cadres, and its international spirit.

The progress of the Party during its stormy life was obviously greatly hindered by its many and grievous errors in applying basically correct Marxist-Leninist policy in this country. Of course, it would be nonsense to suppose that any Party leadership could fight aggressively for a Communist program in the United States, with its powerful and ruthless capitalist class, without making many costly mistakes. Generally these errors over the years have been tendencies to copy mechanically the revolutionary experience of the Russian working class; to run far ahead of the American working class with our policies; to not take sufficiently into consideration concrete Ameri-

can conditions and traditions, and the like. Together with these elementary Left-sectarian trends, the Party has also, from time to time, made serious Right opportunist errors, notably those associated with the names of Pepper, Lovestone, and Browder. And in its present wide yaw to the Right, the Party is now making the most harmful error of this type of its entire career. Like other Communist Parties, ours has also suffered much from bureaucratic practices.

THE "POLITICAL ACTION ASSOCIATION"

The present proposal of Comrade Gates and others to transform the Communist Party into a so-called political action association is based upon the assumption that from here on to Socialism in the United States there will be a minimum of class struggle. In his article in the November number of *Political Affairs*, Comrade Gates paints an idyllic picture in this general respect. He ignores the existence of the general world crisis of capitalism and the certainty of serious repercussions of it in the United States, and he foresees a relatively smooth evolutionary development to Socialism.

This line is much akin with that promulgated by Browder a dozen years ago and by Lovestone in the latter 1920's. It is essentially influenced by the "prosperity" illusions among the masses, as indicated above, and is an ideological weakening under the hammer blows of the

Government's persecution of the Communist Party and its members. Browder and Lovestone, however, were fundamentally wrong in their no-class struggle perspective, and so is Comrade Gates.

In accordance with its generally incorrect perspective, the Gates tendency develops an attack upon the workers' fighting philosophy, strategy, and tactics—Marxism-Leninism—and precisely upon those active policies which made the Communist Party into a fighting organization and which were responsible for such successes as the Party scored. Thus, the Gates group would have us discard the Party form itself, the very incorporation of Marxism-Leninism; it cuts the heart out of our endorsement of Leninism in general by making such endorsement conditional and by abandoning the term Marxism-Leninism; it gives up the principle of democratic centralism; it casts aside the vital concept of the vanguard role of the Party; it ignores the policy of the united front, having in mind a perspective essentially of tailing after the leaders of mass organizations; it abandons the Leninist concept that labor leaders of the Meany type are lieutenants of the capitalists, etc., etc.

The proposed political action association would be primarily a propaganda organization for Socialism. This would be in line with the Gates conception that serious class struggle will be but a minor factor in the American future and that the Communists have no special van-

guard role to play in it, except to advocate Socialism abstractly. The association, because of its bizarre form and limited functions, obviously could not be a mass organization. Besides, in the change-over from Party to association, involving the formal liquidation of the Party, (just as in the Browder case) there would necessarily be a heavy loss of members. The whole project is highly liquidationary, despite the main Resolution's assertion to the contrary.

A political action association would curtail or wipe out Communist activity in many fields, among others in that of electoral political action. It is nonsense, the assertion that there is no place for a Communist party in a country like ours, with a "two-party" system. This fact is demonstrated by the situation in "Two-Party" Great Britain, where the Communist Party, although not large in size, has a wide influence among the workers, especially in the trade union movement and in the local branches of the Labor Party, where Left-progressive strength runs up to a third or more of the total. The British Party follows a correct election policy of supporting Labor Party candidates generally, and of putting up candidates of its own where those of the Labor Party are unsatisfactory or non-existent. Our Party should follow a comparable policy in this country.

Contrary to the claims made for it, such an association as Gates proposes would also not improve the

Communists' legal status. The Government, if disposed to persecute the Communists sharply, would simply arrest the leaders of the new organization under the pretext of its being the Communist Party under a new name, or a Communist front. Nor would a political action association improve our contact with the masses. On the contrary, such a body would be quickly and effectively pilloried publicly as a sinister "boring-from-within" group, with the sole purpose of penetrating and dominating mass organizations. In this respect it would be far more vulnerable than the Communist Party itself.

One of the basic negative consequences of the emergence of the strong Right tendency in the Party has been a decided weakening of its dynamic spirit of internationalism. This is one of the major evil effects of the downplay of class struggle, both in a national and in a world sense. Also, its weakening of the principles of Marxism-Leninism in general tends to drive an ideological wedge between the C.P.U.S.A. and the Communist Parties in other countries. The resultant weak international spirit of the Right, in some cases, definitely verges into tendencies towards bourgeois nationalism.

The proposed political action association is the climax to the campaign that has been carried on internally in the Party by the Right tendency for the past several months. This campaign has included extravagant and concocted charges of multitudi-

nous errors allegedly made by the Party during the recent period. This crass exaggeration has served to discredit the past activities of the Party and also the Party leadership. The future of the Party has also been assailed by placing before the members a perspective of a new organization to be formed, at first an almost immediate "mass party of Socialism" and now a political action association. All this has been highly demoralizing to the Party membership, which, not surprisingly, has already been gravely disturbed over the deeply shocking revelations of the Stalin cult of the individual and especially over the recent tragic and bloody events in Hungary. This campaign of systematically belittling the Party—its past, its present, its future and its leadership—has confused the theory, policies, and practices of the Party and it has been carried on basically for the purpose of clearing the way for the Gates plan to liquidate the Communist Party and to put in its place a "political action association," which would be essentially only a propaganda body for Socialism.

RETAIN AND STRENGTHEN THE COMMUNIST PARTY

The American working class needs imperatively a strong Communist Party, based firmly upon the principles of Marxism-Leninism. This would be true even if the perspective ahead of the American workers were such a smooth and struggle-less one as that foreseen by Comrade Gates. But his picture of

the future is basically false. The workers of this country will certainly confront a perspective of sharpened class struggle. In such a situation, they must have a fighting Communist Party, acting as their vanguard. The need for this type of Party was graphically illustrated during the cold war years, when the big majority of the mass leaders tamely followed the imperialist lead of monopoly capital in its aggressive foreign policy.

Those who think that the present "boom" conditions in industry and the corresponding class collaboration relations between the top trade union leaders and the monopoly capitalists will last indefinitely are in for a rude awakening. The current post-war industrial boom is wearing to its end. American monopoly capital still has lots of fight left in it, as it will demonstrate once its general position, in the world and in an internal economic crisis, begins to deteriorate seriously under the inexorable workings of the general crisis of world capitalism, and when American workers face massive assaults against their living and working conditions. Such a perspective of struggle makes doubly necessary the building of a strong Communist Party.

The C.P.U.S.A. stands committed to the possibility of a parliamentary road to Socialism; but this course must not be misunderstood in the smooth, no-class struggle sense in which it is now being put forth by some comrades in the Party. Instead,

the perspective in this respect must be conceived on a fighting basis, as I stated it originally in the pamphlet, *In Defense of the Communist Party and the Indicted Leaders*. There I pictured the American workers as fighting their way ahead towards Socialism in the setting of a developing capitalist crisis; with the monopolists using every means in their power to strip the workers of their democratic rights, and with the workers fighting successfully to restrain and defeat the capitalists' violence and to maintain intact the democratic institutions of the country, firmly enough to enable them to proceed legally and in a relatively peaceful manner to the establishment of Socialism.

This is a realistic, class-struggle perspective of the road to Socialism in the United States. It calls not for the liquidation of the Communist Party and of Marxism-Leninism, but for their continuation and strengthening. Just as the workers and their same that powerful and militant peaceful co-existence among the various powers in the world only on the basis of their strength, vigilance, and struggle, so also, on the same principle, can the workers of the United States travel a parliamentary road to Socialism. It would be wrong to assume, that powerful and militant American imperialism will surrender up its control of society short of the sharpest struggle. The big lesson for us in all this is that not only in their daily struggles do the American workers and their allies need the

Marxist-Leninist Communist Party, but also that this need will be many times greater when they eventually start on their path to Socialism.

What we as Communists should do, therefore, in our present difficult situation, is to rebuild actively the Communist Party, now seriously weakened after its long persecution by the Government during the cold war years. And instead of casting aside Marxism-Leninism the Party should strive more closely to adapt our working class science to the specific needs of the American class situation, and to become more skilled in its application in the workers' struggle. To abandon or emasculate Marxism-Leninism would be unthinkable for Communists.

In the profound Party discussion of the past several months, in countless letters, articles, meetings, etc., the members have made it very clear what improvements are necessary in order to adapt more effectively our Party and our ideology to the class struggle in the United States. Here I can only list some of these projected advances which, for their general correctness, cannot be questioned. Among them are more democracy and less bureaucracy in the Party and generally an end to Stalin-like "command" practices that grew up over the years; more theoretical initiative upon our part and an end to long-time tendencies of waiting for leaders in other countries to speak out first upon important questions of this character; to develop a comradely critical relationship to-

wards other Communist parties and the Socialist countries, instead of the uncritical attitudes of previous years; a more close application of policies to concrete American conditions, instead of the previous often mechanical application of general international policies; a cooperative, less dogmatic attitude towards other Left groups in this country; the institution of practices of genuine Leninist criticism and self-criticism in the Party, etc. And overall, a continuous fight against the basic Left-sectarian deviation of the Party, without, however, neglecting to combat the Right danger. All these betterments in our theory and practice can be far more effectively developed and applied in the Communist Party than in a nondescript political action association. Our task, consequently, is to help to develop Marxism-Leninism and to make it more flexible and adaptable to the American situation, not to cast it aside for the sake of some hastily improvised program of more than dubious validity.

The discarding of the Communist Party in favor of a political action association, and with this the serious weakening of Marxism-Leninism as our guiding philosophy would constitute a major defeat for the American working class; an unjustified ideological retreat on our part in the face of arrogant American imperialism. Only in this sense could it be understood by the workers in this country and throughout the world. Organized reaction would

hail it with glee, as indicating that in the strongest capitalist country in the world there is no basis for Communism and the Communist Party. We must not make such a disastrous and needless surrender. Other Communist parties in the world have from time to time lost more heavily than we in their fight against powerful reaction and they have later recovered greater strength than ever. The C.P.U.S.A. can and must similarly rebuild its weakened forces.

It is now being proposed that at the coming National Convention the Party should not be transformed into a political action association, but this matter should be referred to a continuing general Party discussion, looking to a special convention a year hence to settle the question. But to prolong the Party discussion on this matter in the period after the convention would be a most serious error. It would expose the Party not only to debating a sterile question, to which the members are now obviously opposed, but it would also condemn it to a year-long destructive factional fight. The proposed political action association must be specifically and decisively rejected by the Convention, as having no basis in political conditions now nor in the foreseeable future. The maintenance and building of the Communist Party should be categorically affirmed. This is the sole road to Party unity, mass activity and strength. It would be bankruptcy to bypass this question at the convention and it would seriously cripple the Party.