

What Is Communism?

1—General Johnson Proves It

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CASTING about for a current text to introduce this examination of some of the problems of Communism and why it occupies the center of political thought in the United States, it was inevitable that I should hit on General Hugh S. Johnson. For some time the worthy General has been an invaluable adjunct to the Agitation-Propaganda Department of the Communist Party. His utterances occupy a place of honor in bold-face type in our reports and resolutions, serving to prove the points which we are laboring to establish. In fact, if Hughie Johnson, by some unaccountable misfortune, did not exist, we Communists would have the necessity, as Voltaire is reported to have said about God, to invent him. He has the inimitable faculty of "spilling the beans" at the moment when and on the issues about which Communist resolutions are written. When General Johnson went forth into the wilderness, bearing the sins of the Roosevelt administration on his bowed back, no one mourned his going more than the Communists. We thought we were losing our unconscious collaborator. But God was with us! The General obtained a job as newspaper columnist! Our sorrow was turned into rejoicing.

Our text is from the column of April 4, dated in Washington:

But this is certain. If the powers of government and industry cannot, by some immediate and determined action, be exercised to lift this curse—no power on earth can avert big trouble soon.

The "curse," it is clear, is the crisis and depression which closed down about 30 percent of our productive apparatus and excluded about 40 percent of the population from useful work, most of them condemned to enforced idleness.

Now, the unsophisticated reader may well ask: "What is so valuable about this statement? The ordinary man-in-the-street knows that. Surely the Communists should know it."

True, the Communists knew it even before our General. But coming from Johnson it establishes two fundamental points of our argument: (1) It means that everybody knows it now, even those who publicly deny it; and (2) it means that General Johnson was a liar when he said in San Francisco last summer, that the general strike was a Communist conspiracy—that same general strike which taught Johnson to look for "big trouble soon."

It is important to establish, from such an authoritative source, that the great social struggles, the class battles, the strikes, the disorders, that rise like a great wave around us everywhere, are caused by the breakdown of

capitalist production, and the inability of government and industrial management, representing the capitalist owners, to find any solution after five years of efforts.

Let us again delve into the mind of our authority, to find the evidence upon which he bases his expectation of "big trouble soon." He describes the kind of letters written to him as a result of his famous radio address, in which he rebuked the "eighty million cry-babies" for being discontented:

My mail changed its color both as to the kind of people who were writing and as to what they said. Some of it is angry and vicious. This plainly comes from people who have suffered most from this depression. They are bitter, resentful and desperate. . . . People don't get over such wounds in a lifetime. . . . This resentment of suffering is a dangerous thing, because a majority are sufferers.

The majority of the population of the United States is rapidly becoming "bitter, resentful and desperate." Some of them are "angry and vicious." They will not forget the lessons they are learning "in a lifetime." Their attitude is "a dangerous thing" for the men, the class, the system, which they will hold responsible for their sufferings. This is the evidence which General Johnson contributes to the Communist analysis of the situation in the United States.

To make the picture complete, let us add to the evidence of the champion of the New Deal, that of the capitalists who oppose the Roosevelt policies. We quote from a circular letter broadcasted by the New York Chamber of Commerce on March 30, 1935:

We will not desert our country in this hour of her wreckage and degradation.

For the moment we are not interested in the promise of our New York capitalists that they "will not desert our country." We can take that for granted, so long as they can continue to draw huge incomes which, even when decreasing in total sum, are still increasing in proportion to the total national income. What is of importance here is to establish the essential agreement between New Dealers and the Right opposition to the New Deal, that the condition of the country is such as can be summed up in the words "wreckage and degradation."

On behalf of the Communist Party, which leads the labor opposition to the New Deal, I can declare that on this question we are in complete agreement. The united front on this judgment of fact is surely a broad and all-inclusive one. Our agreement, however, stops short at this point. On the questions of locating the precise responsibility for the crisis, and

what is the way out, the Communists stand on one side with clear and definite opinions and program; on the other side is a Babel of confusing and confused opinion and counsel.

It is hardly worth our while to examine the "arguments" of the Old Deal against the New Deal, though their real policies are basically important. These arguments have lost mass appeal. Let no illusions arise from the current fact that movie audiences are everywhere receiving in cold silence the warm smiles of F.D.R. in the news-reels, while granting a moment of applause, at least lukewarm, to the cold countenance of Herbert Hoover. That applause is only an indirect registration of disillusionment with the New Deal; it is a recognition of error in having accepted F.D.R. as "something better, something hopeful"; before election day the memories of 1929-1932, and the first days of March, 1933, when Hoover graciously handed over to his successor a nation of closed banks and universal panic, will effectively prevent a re-emergence of Hoover Republicanism.

It is important to establish what are the essential differences in policy between the Old Deal and the New Deal. To do that, we must note their points of agreement: these are, in the first place, agreement that "recovery" means, and must mean, a recovery in profits (in the rate of profit as well as in the proportion of profit in the total national income), from which alone all other phases of recovery can flow as from a fountain-head; agreement that this can be achieved only by strengthening the role of the central government against all forces that threaten this profit, both from within (demands of workers, farmers, veterans, etc.), and from without (encroachments of other imperialist powers upon U.S. foreign trade—Britain, Japan), by means of increased repressions and limitations upon civil rights, intensified national chauvinism, and preparations for war. Upon these essentials of the policy of modern finance-capital, there is implicit and explicit agreement between the New and Old Deals.

The differences arise upon the basis of the existence of two possible paths to reach the common goal. The general character of these two paths are a modern example of the dilemma upon which Hamlet was cogitating when he uttered the oft-quoted lines:

Whether 'tis better to bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of.

The Old Deal would cold-bloodedly "bear those ills we have," preferring to face the issues, which it knows must be fought through, in their clearest form. It is for deflation, sound money (gold standard), reduction of

wages, lengthening of hours, ruthless elimination of marginal enterprises, reduction of social services (up to complete elimination), governmental retrenchment all round, governmental subsidies only to the biggest financial institutions, placing the government squarely *behind* big business which directly carries through its attacks upon the masses, boldly fighting against all "demagogues" who promise any other way out of the crisis. This is the policy of the Old Deal. It must be given the credit for a certain elementary honesty and forthrightness, a facing of the real issue.

But the Old Deal suffers from one fatal defect! It exposes before the masses the true class alignments, and thereby mobilizes the masses in revolt against these policies which openly condemn them to destitution and degradation. It is to escape "those ills we have" of rising revolt among the masses, that the New Deal comes forward, leading the flight "to others that we know not of."

The New Deal, however, merely gives a new form to the Old Deal policies. The New Deal launches upon a course of inflation (for the moment a "controlled" inflation). The dollar is devalued by 40 percent. This is the foundation upon which the whole structure of New Deal policies is erected. From this base, hourly wage-rates can be raised while actually reducing the workers' share in national income; hours can be shortened with the effect of distributing the burden of unemployment among a larger number of workers, and taking it off the relief rolls; some marginal enterprises can be kept in operation while actually speeding up the trustification of industry as a whole; social services can be formally extended while actually gutting them of their real significance; the state budget can be multiplied while its burdens are lightened on the rich and heavily increased upon the poor; governmental subsidies can be extended to the lower ranks of capitalists while actually multiplying the weight of subsidies to finance capital; the government can be placed *at the head* of big business with the proclamation that thereby big business has been "subordinated to the general good"; and finally the government itself takes over the role of the "demagogue" who promised another way out of the crisis. This is the New Deal. It chokes and disintegrates for a time the mass revolt against the Old Deal, while achieving the same aims at the price of deliberately abandoning a clear posing of issues, cultivating hypocrisy as a system, shrouding economic and political policies in a fog of mysticism—and sharply intensifying, even while postponing some issues, the fundamental struggle of contradictions inherent in capitalism which gave birth to the crisis.

It is a characteristic of the New Deal that it must deal extensively in demagogy. The chief item of this is the slogan of "economic planning," which the Old Dealers denounce as "regimentation." But every honest theoretician of capitalism, who is able or willing to follow through his logic to the

bitter end, will state as emphatically as any Communist that "economic planning" and "capitalism" are two utterly opposed and mutually exclusive categories which can mix no more than oil and water.

With the New Deal all semblance of a unified system of economic policies has disappeared. Confusion reigns supreme. Anybody's latest crack-pot theory is as good as anybody else's, because not one of them, from the Brain Trust down to Huey Long, any longer pays even lip-service to science. Again we call upon our authority, General Johnson, to give evidence on this point. On April 23, speaking about the Brookings Institution, the last refuge of capitalist economic science, the General says:

His (Brookings) principle . . . was that there is as great a need for a purely scientific clinic of our economic ills as there is for a running survey of our physical ills. . . . The Brookings Institution, masquerading under the ideas of its grand old founder, has become a pressure bureau to publicize the preconceived ideas of Harold Moulton. If economics is an art, where was his warning of the 1929 collapse?

Pertinent question, indeed, oh General! It could be addressed, with the same pertinence, to every capitalist institution of science and learning. It must be added that the inability to foresee the crisis is equalled by the inability to understand or explain it afterward.

But there were people who foresaw the crisis, and loudly proclaimed it! Early in 1929, the Communist International addressed a letter to the Sixth National Convention of the Communist Party of the United States which warned of "the approaching crisis in America." A few months later, in May, another letter sharply called attention to the fact that:

With a distinctness unprecedented in history, American capitalism is exhibiting now the effects of the inexorable laws of capitalist development, the laws of decline and downfall of capitalist society. The general crisis of capitalism is growing more rapidly than it may seem at first glance. The crisis will shake also the foundation of the power of American imperialism.

On May 6, 1929, Joseph Stalin made a speech on the problems of the C.P.U.S.A., in the course of which he made the following clear declaration:

Many now think that the general crisis of world capitalism will not affect America. That, of course, is not true. It is entirely untrue, comrades. The crisis of world capitalism is developing with increasing rapidity and cannot but affect American capitalism. The three million now unemployed in America are the first swallows indicating the ripening of the economic crisis in America. . . . I think the moment is not far off when a revolutionary crisis will develop in America.

The Central Committee of the C.P.U.S.A. since its Tenth Plenum in the first days of October, 1929, when it finally removed the Lovestone leadership which had been advertising "the Victorian Age of American imperialism," has been proving the correctness of the judgments quoted above—ably assisted by the crisis and such helpers as General

Johnson. The Tenth Plenum even then noted the downturn of production in July, and evaluated this as the beginnings of the crisis. Within a few weeks the Wall Street crash dramatically confirmed this judgment.

These historical notes serve to show that it is by no means an accident that the Communist Party has been developing a tremendous mass influence in the course of the crisis. It was the only organization which foretold the crisis. It was the only one which correctly analyzed the policies of Hoover. It was the only one which from the first moments of the New Deal already indicated the nature of its policies and their inevitable outcome—an outcome now clear to the world. The Communist Party could do this because it is the only organization that is armed with science, with the teachings of the greatest social scientists—Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin.

All of which will serve as an introduction to a series of articles, in which, at the request of the editors of THE NEW MASSES, I will undertake to answer dozens of questions which they have received from their readers about Communism, the Communist Party and its program, its relation to other parties, and to the various classes in the population. We will take these questions up in the concrete form in which they have been put to us, trying, however, to arrange them as much as possible in a certain logical order of development.

Beginning with his second article, in next week's issue, Earl Browder will answer supplementary questions, arising each week. Readers are invited to send in their questions, addressed to Earl Browder, care of THE NEW MASSES.

Georgia Work Song

Heiura, Heiura
Ding, dong, ding
Sing 'bout Freedom
Nigger sing

Blow de horn
Soun' de drum
Slave no mo'
Freedom come

Owl Head, Lueger
Magazine
Got no gun
Grab anythin'

Come ashoutin'
Neber stop
Fo de bottom
Hit de top

Worl' a bottle
In yo' han'
Bus' it open
Be a man

Come on join
Dis fightin' ban'
Make lousy coun'ry
Promise lan'

Collected by LAWRENCE GELLER.