

THE BATTLE FOR THE YOUTH

By WILLIAM Z. FOSTER

THE MEASURE OF THE EXPERIENCE and maturity of any social movement can be accurately measured by its attitude toward the youth of its country. It is significant, therefore, that in all countries the capitalist ruling class and its subordinate organizations of all types—political, economic, religious, cultural, and others—are always very highly “youth conscious.” Almost without exception, they constantly pay very close attention to winning the support of, or at least control over, the younger generation. Their activities indicate that they are very alert to the significance of the truism that the future belongs to the youth, and they systematically take guarantees of the future by propagandizing and organizing the developing generation.

The capitalist class all over the world, as a vital part of its governing techniques as the dominant class, has always devoted much effort to the task of getting the youth on its side. Its schools, carefully guarded from revolutionary and democratic influences, systematically fill the youths' heads with capitalist propaganda, misnamed “education.” Its churches, along with teaching the young people religious ideas, seek no less to inculcate in their

minds a loyalty to the capitalist order of society. Its industrial system always places as a special point in its activities the ideological corruption of the working class youth. Its military organizations are vast systems for mobilizing and training the youth for armed defense of the capitalists' prerogatives and exploitations. Its radio, press, and popular literature incessantly sound the slogans of capitalism in the ears of young people, and its organized sports movement is saturated through and through with capitalist ideology. With these and many other means, the capitalists strive, with all too much success, to win the fighting, progressive qualities of the youth to the maintenance of its social system.

The intense cultivation of the youth, in all these various ways, has long been a characteristic of capitalism in every country, but this youth-consciousness of the capitalists reached its apex with the prewar growth of fascism in Italy, Germany, and many other countries in various quarters of the globe.

With the fascists, youth became a veritable cult. The fascists, to win their way to complete political dictatorship, needed mass enthusiasm, recklessness, and a bold fighting spirit. These qualities they found in abundance in the youth. Hence, everywhere, with resolute determination, they concentrated upon winning the young generation, girls as well as boys.

Often, in their eagerness to capture the youth, the fascists even ig-

nored or minimized the adult workers and other key sections of the masses of the population. They went out to capture the youth at all costs. Sometimes, in their eagerness, they even adopted absurd measures in order to give their movement a youth appearance, such as the systematic concealment of Hitler's birthdays (so that the people would not realize that he was aging), or the ridiculous publicized athletic stunt put on by the plump Mussolini and his puffing Cabinet members and other so-called glorifications of youth.

Fascism, of course, was (and is) the dictatorship of the most reactionary sections of finance capital; but by virtue of its intense attention to capturing the younger generation, it usually appeared very much in the guise of a youth movement. For it was primarily the youth who formed the fighting fasci of Mussolini and the stormtroopers of Hitler. It was chiefly the youth who fought the fascists through to power in every country where the latter managed to seize control. So youth-conscious were (and are) the fascists that during the late war they actually succeeded in winning the support, or at least the tolerance, even of many young people in the various countries occupied and dented by Hitler's troops. And they accomplished this ideological corruption while the great bulk of the more adult population was violently anti-Hitlerite.

Although the capitalists, and above all their fascist agents, have

always been fundamentally youth-conscious, the same, unfortunately, cannot be said of the labor, cooperative, Socialist, and Communist movements. In the main, during the crucial prewar period, these movements grossly underestimated the significance and vital political importance of the youth. True, they all paid considerable attention to the youth, but their youth activities were relatively insignificant in comparison with the intense youth concentration of the fascists. The democratic movements before World War II, in their efforts to grow and to establish themselves, turned their major attention to winning the adult workers. They almost universally neglected the youth. A great exception to this neglect was the Soviet Union, which has always been highly youth-conscious, in fact even more so than the fascists themselves. But this was only an exception to the general rule, because even the Communist Parties of the capitalist countries, although they were not so negligent in this respect as the trade unions, cooperatives, and Socialist Parties, nevertheless grievously neglected work among the youth. The general result of all this underestimation of the youth by the labor movements of prewar days was that Hitler, Mussolini, and other fascist leaders largely ran away with the younger people, and the workers' organizations paid with their very existence for their negligence.

The various branches of the general movement of labor and the peo-

ple in Europe have not remained blind, however, to their whole Hitler development. They have learned much from the fascists' capture of the youth. They now recognize the extreme folly of neglecting the youth. As a result, the Left-led trade unions, the Communist Parties, and the Left-Socialist Parties and groupings, are today all very youth-conscious and are actively seeking to win the young people for the cause of democracy and Socialism. These social movements are determined that the prewar debacle regarding the neglect of the youth shall not happen a second time.

Now, all this has an important bearing, in a most direct sense, upon the American situation. Nowhere in the postwar world is the question of the political leadership of the youth more vital than it is right here in the United States. For the big capitalists of this country, with the Truman Administration and Congress slavishly doing their bidding, have embarked upon an aggressive program to set up an ultra-reactionary regime in this country, and to establish Wall Street's imperialist domination over the world; and for this they need the support of the youth. Their whole drive toward reactionary goals, including its youth aspects, is animated with the spirit of fascism. The American would-be world conquerors, like their brother-in-spirit, Hitler, realize the urgent necessity of having the score of millions of young people under their control if they are to

succeed in their plans of unbounded exploitation and domination. Hence, they are out to capture the youth with any means in their power. Their drive to win the younger generation has not, of course, reached the intensity that characterized the fascist movements of prewar Europe, but it is definitely heading in that direction.

The drive of American reaction to win the youth is proceeding along many channels. In the schools and colleges, a vigorous campaign is being pushed to extinguish all democratic ideals and to saturate the student body with Red-baiting and Soviet-hating ideas. In the realm of industry, the National Association of Manufacturers, with its protégé, the Junior Achievement (Inc.), is busily seeking to corrupt the youth for its own reactionary purposes. All the various religious and other large youth organizations are under the pressure of Jew-haters and Red-baiters. The American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars, both agents of Wall Street big capital, are also sowing the seeds of imperialist, war-making poison into the minds of the millions of younger veterans under their leadership. And the Truman Administration, plus the Republicans in Congress, is trying hard to put across universal military training, which is a major part of the widespread campaign now going on in all the fields of publicity and education to mobilize the youth of this country behind the banners of Wall Street and

for a program that leads to economic collapse, fascism, imperialist aggression, and war.

Many signs indicate that the youth are highly resistant to Wall Street's attempt to enlist them as union-busters and cannon fodder. On the college campuses there are many strong and progressive youth developments; in the trade unions the younger elements are characterized by their militantly democratic spirit; and among the war veterans many popular polls, as well as various mass indications, show that this group of youth is definitely on the progressive side. In short, despite the terrific reactionary pressure and barrage of imperialist and anti-democratic propaganda to which the youth are at present being subjected, the young people are showing strong progressive tendencies. The youth of this country are now fairly clamoring for strong progressive support and leadership.

However, there is a grave danger, if this support and leadership will not be forthcoming, that the youth will become more and more susceptible to the wiles of the capitalists. The young people of this country face many difficult problems. They find both their present outlook and their future perspectives most uncertain and precarious. Hosts of them are unable to find homes in which to live. Millions more are unable to get married and to establish families. Already the deadly disease of unemployment is beginning to spread among their ranks.

As a result, there is a growing realization by the youth of the instability of present-day capitalism. This is to the good, but what can be dangerous is the wrong conclusions they often draw from collapsing capitalism. For militant, aggressive youth demand categorical and definite solutions to all these burning questions and problems. If satisfactory answers are not given them by the progressive forces, there is always the keen danger that the young people will listen to the blandishments of reactionary demagogues. The outstanding success of Hitler with the demoralized and confused youth of Germany and Europe should be a sufficient instruction for us on this point.

As matters now stand in the United States, the youth are being sadly neglected by the various sections of the labor and progressive movement, even more so, in many respects, than the way these same forces neglected them in Europe in the prewar days. Even the Communists share in this neglect, which is all the more inexcusable in view of the great influence they exercised in the powerful and progressive youth movement of ten or twelve years ago. Let our Party and labor generally beware of the danger of neglecting the youth.

One of the greatest weaknesses of all sections of the progressive movement of this country is the tendency to leave the youth to its own devices. The assumption is that the young people will take care of themselves

in an organized way and look after their own problems. For, have they not many big youth organizations? This idea is, of course, a great error. Naturally, the youth have strong organizations of various kinds that carry on all sorts of progressive activities. But all this is not enough. The youth must be extended full recognition as a very vital part of the branch of the labor and progressive movement. And they must be given all the collaboration and support which goes with such recognition. Tendencies to isolate or to ignore the youth can have disastrous consequences.

The new third party developing in this country will have to make the winning of the youth one of its major objectives. Especially the trade unions, too, will have to start to wake up to the vital role of the youth and also to their own responsibilities. As it is, the youth work of the A. F. of L. unions, with rare exceptions, is about zero. And the C.I.O.'s work in this field is not much greater. All this constitutes an intolerable situation. The unions, in defense of themselves and of American democracy, must begin to pay real attention to the youth, as the unions of France, Italy, Poland, Yugoslavia, and many other European countries are now doing.

The unions should take care attentively of the demands of youth

in industry, especially on questions of wages, opportunities, and general training regulations. The unions, too, should develop a vast network of youth sports, organizations and activities. They should build up, too, elaborate activities to utilize the leisure and promote the culture of the youth.

Active youth work is a "must" for any trade union movement that is alert to the dynamic quality of the younger generations and that realizes the imperative task of winning them over to its side in the very difficult struggles ahead.

In the United States there are some 22,000,000 boys and girls between the ages of 16 and 21 years, of whom about 9,000,000 are workers. This is a stupendous force, full of the most dynamic potentialities. It must be won for the cause of peace and democracy. But there is no assurance that the youth will be automatically on the side of this progress. The most powerful reaction in our country is avidly striving to capture and use the youth for its own profit-hungry, warmongering purposes. Therefore, if labor and the progressive forces want the youth, they must fight for them. The question of who will win the Battle for the Youth now going on in our country, is one of the most decisive political issues that the American people have to confront.