Significant Cross-Currents In American Politics

By JAY LOVESTONE

SIGNIFICANT political changes are in the making. Traditional party lines are crumbling and are beginning to mean less than little. This holds true for the political organizations of the workers as well as for those of the bourgeoisie. The social and economic consequences of the structural changes developing in American economy over a period of years and the resultants of mighty pressure of international factors are now coming into sharp relief.

A Tense Atmosphere

It is in this atmosphere and for these reasons that the death of even so conservative a mediocrity as Senator Robinson of Arkansas helps bring on rapid and wide spread reverberations. Under such circumstances, Roosevelt's recent Congressional picnic at the Jefferson Islands Club assumes serious import. It is in this situation that the fight over the President's anaemic court proposals generates such high political blood-pressure and such low thoughts. Why, even the Daily Worker has been compelled to cry out against "body-snatching, Tory style" because the opponents of court reorganization have jumped on the death of the reactionary proponent of Roosevelt's court measure as an occasion for demanding the dropping of the whole idea. It is rather interesting that not a word does this official communist organ have to utter about Robinson's tie-up with the flogging of sharecroppers in his own "democratic, peaceful, happy and prosperous Arkansas."

Class lines are hardening; class realignments are in the making; the old political set-up or the two-party system can no longer function smoothly, can no longer reflect accurately the interests of the dominant forces in the capitalist ruling class. Thanks to the recent economic crisis, great sections of the middle class and the working class have become more articulate, are wanting and demanding more and are organizing to get it. Much of this new mood was vaguely, inadequately and in a distorted form reflected in the last presidential elections. In no small measure does the emergence of a new American labor movement, the C.I.O., express this new attitude of self-assertion and a desire to assume more power on the part of the workers, particularly those of the basic industries and those hitherto unorganized.

New lines of division are turning into deep grooves of discord and dissension in the ranks of the owning class. More and more does Roosevelt appear not as the leader of even a heterogeneous party—the Democratic party with its political menagerie or veritable Noah's ark—but rather as the leader of a new school of political policy. Today, the President is playing far more the role of leader of mild American liberalism than as the dominating figure in the Farley-coordinated Democratic party that smashed Hoover and crushed Landon. The issues dividing the ranks of the dominant class in American society are taking on real clarity and greater sharpness.

The Respective Positions

The President and his followers are convinced that, in order to preserve the capitalist system with its parliamentary democracy in the United States, it is imperative for the topmost bankers and business men to make certain relatively small concessions to substantial layers of the farming population, urban middle class folks, and the wage-earning masses. Roosevelt and his school are further of the opinion that adequate steps in this direction can generally be taken only by the federal government and must be taken speedily. The opponents of this course, whether they be good-standing Southern Democrats or rock-ribbed Republicans from the eastern tier of states, deny that the stability and continuity of the present economic system demand such measures or so many of them. Some even go further and raise a howl against the adoption of the most inadequate social legislation and half-hearted labor laws on the ground that they endanger the present socio-economic system as a whole.

It is over questions of this nature that Washington is now excited. It is cross-currents of this sort that will be evidenced in the coming mayoralty campaign in New York City. For this reason more than any other is the labor issue—commonly called the C.I.O. —today causing much more havoc in the ruling conglomeration bearing the name Democratic party (really a coalition party in the European sense) than in the staid and today smaller and, therefore, less heterogeneous, Republican party. Had class relations in the United States already reached the level of clarity and sharpness that they have long ago attained in the principal European countries, the Democratic party would today be several distinct parties. So would the Republican outfit.

The Court Controversy

Here are the roots of America's constitutional crisis now maturing but still far from mature. This is the basic import of the conflict over the "modernization" of the American government structure, over the "renovation" of the Supreme Court. In American class relations, the latter represents a sort of "keeper of the king's conscience"—with the institution of private property, for a diminishing proportion of the population, being king in our "great, happy and prosperous democracy." That is why so many Republicans and Democrats, who for years paraded as liberals, are so enraged when even a hint is dropped about changing or diminishing the terrific power of the high court. These phrase-mongers like Wheeler, Shipstead and Nye are terrified that even the slightest change in the Supreme Court structure would tend to weaken the private property structure. Under one cover or another, these "liberal" gentlemen are playing the game of the most outspoken reactionaries, of the biggest business interests. When we say this we do not for a moment believe in the President's court proposal as an effective means of reducing the power of the judiciary which is the most servile agency of big capital in this country. Here we are merely emphasizing that even the most inadequate attempt to touch the sanctum sanctorum of capitalist rule arouses indescribable horror amongst many who hail themselves as liberals.

It is essential to separate the wheat from the chaff in this conflict. It is not merely a conflict over the court measures. The latter is only part of the whole struggle out of which new political realignments will come and out of which new political parties will be born. Five generations ago the rising American bourgeoisie formed Committees of Correspondence. These were, historically speaking, revolutionary agencies. Today, the big bourgeoisie in this country, together with sectors of the middle class which they have been able to befuddle, are forming the Citizens National Committee—a lair of vipers of blackest reaction—the Liberty League under another name and revarnished at the bottom. Nor is it accidental that this body was formed in Johnstown and grew out of the recent steel strike. This body is as narrow as a snake's tongue. It was conceived by Mr. Grace and born in Bethlehem Steel's front office. It is being reared by the biggest capitalist agencies and represents only their narrowest interests.

Some False Issues

All the noise made by the top layers of the ruling class against government centralization is just that much balderdash. They are not opposed to government centralization as such. There is no such thing as government centralization in the abstract. These same people did not utter a syllable of protest when Roosevelt proclaimed a bank holiday in their interest. They did not shed a tear over the billions voted by the federal government to help banks and corporations. To them this is good centralization because it helps their pocketbooks. Hoover did lots of that for them too; then, they never cried about the menace of government centralization. However, they are against government centralization when social legislation is involved. Then they want to preserve the fading foundations of "state rights" because they know that it is impossible to make even a pretense at effective social legislation on a state basis.

In short, we must always be on guard to strip clear of its hypocricy all the talk about "the aggrandizement of the President at the expense of Congress and the Supreme Court." The powers-that-be in this country have always had contempt for Congress. Really important legislation in the days of Coolidge and Hoover never was conceived or born in the halls of Congress—precisely because Wall Street willed it so. Now, these exploiting class demagogues rave and rant, give vent to moral indignation and think Roosevelt is pulling their edifice down. They are short-sighted. They don't recognize a good friend in need when they see him in deed.

The Fury of Wall Street

Typical of this panic and furor attitude is the following outbreak by C. Norman Stabler, financial editor of the New York Herald Tribune (July 18, 1937):

"Of course, we still have to pay their bills. They have run up the national debt thru their wasteful administration of relief and agricultural benefits; they have saddled the country with phoney monetary policies that were justified only by the expediency of garnering votes from certain interests; they have sided with the rabble-rousing element in organized labor; they have sought to regiment the affairs of the citizens beyond reason; they have put the hand of their great political machine into the state, city and district governments all over the nation; and they have carried on a hate program against those who are conducting honest business and making honest income tax returns. There are other indictments in the long list that could be added."

By "they' Mr. Stabler means Roosevelt and his followers. It is this spirit and on this basis of opposition that many Wall Street and Washington circles talk of forming a "Constitutional party" in 1940. Already there is a plan afoot to have a "Non-Partisan Alliance" formed for the 1938 Congressional elections so as to secure "the solidarity of the Republican party in the north and west and the solidarity of the independent Democratic groups in the south as well as everywhere else."

Labor's Big Job

Of course, labor must watch these developments keenly and utilize these divisions in the ranks of the ruling class for its own welfare and interests. But labor will begin in folly and end in disaster if it does anything more than make use of these divisions, if it bases its whole policy on these divisions. Even the most liberal among the old-party ranks and spokesmen cannot be trusted in a struggle by labor for its rights. It is a Roosevelt Democratic party governor in Ohio who has been helping Republic Steel terrorize workers. The liberal Democratic Governor Murphy of Michigan is playing with the idea of signing a vicious anti-labor bill and at the same time hailing it as a blessing.

The year 1940 will be a crucial year. The months before it will decide whether the next presidential year will see political realignments in the United States matured to the point of taking on an organized expression in the form of new parties. For the sake of self-defense, in the interest of improving its conditions and elevating its status, labor must in the coming months strike out for ever more independent action—political as well as industrial. Local labor parties and state labor parties participating actively and independently in the coming municipal and congressional campaign will help lots in this sense. It is only thru such independent labor action that the working class can defend and enhance its own interests and take steps towards assuming its rightful place in society.

They Seem To Be Getting Along!

EARNINGS FOR FIRST QUARTER OF 1937 AND 1936 ENDING MARCH 31, FOR SELECTED CORPORATIONS

	Quarterly Net Income 1937	1936	% *Increase*
American Telephone & Telegraph Co. & subsidiaries	$43,435,751	$34,442,957	26
Du Pont de Nemours & Co. (E. I.)	16,013,346	14,713,782	9
General Electric Co.	11,626,408	7,086,830	64
Inland Steel Corp.	5,008,774	1,934,632	159
Otis Elevator Co.	1,306,993	422,491	209
Procter & Gamble Co.	8,198,490	4,010,510	104
Shell Union Oil Co.	3,674,479	1,681,984	118
Standard Oil Co. of Calif.	7,889,489	2,952,958	167
Underwood Elliott Fisher Co.	1,405,432	828,661	70
Union Carbide & Carbon Corp.	9,947,712	7,502,393	33
*Union Oil Co. of California	2,200,000	400,000	450
*United Fruit	3,396,000	2,650,000	28
U. S. Gypsum Co.	1,411,622	436,617	232
U. S. Steel Corp.	28,561,533	3,376,304	746
Westinghouse Air Brake Co.	2,639,354	513,613	414
Westinghouse Elec. & Mfg. Co.	5,341,512	3,732,454	43
Youngstown Sheet & Tube Co.	4,886,019	1,897,299	158

*Estimated.

FARM TENANTS INCREASE NEW SURVEY SHOWS

The problem of farm tenancy in the United States is briefly but incisively discussed in an interesting pamphlet, "Farmers Without Land," by Rupert B. Vance, just published by the Public Affairs Committee.

Contrary to the usual opinion, tenancy has not decreased, Mr. Vance points out. The apparent decline in the ratio of farm tenancy is wholly illusory, as a matter of fact. Despite a slight drop—from 42.4% to 42.1%—in the percentage of farm tenancy for the country as a whole, the ratio of tenancy actually increased between 1930 and 1935 in every state of the North and West with the exception of New Mexico. Only in the South has there been a decline in the ratio of tenancy and even here there was an actual increase in the number of tenants. The decrease in ratio seems to be due entirely to a sharp rise in ownership among the "poor whites" who opened up small farms in rough upland areas of poor soil.

More than a fourth of the new farms are located in the Appalachian counties of West Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee where many unemployed miners returned to farms that had previously been given up as unproductive. A slight decline occurred in the number of Negro tenants but this was more than counterbalanced, in the South alone, by the increase in the number of white tenants. At present, no less than two-thirds of the South's two million tenant farmers and sharecroppers are whites, the descendants of the small owners and frontiersmen of pre-Civil War days.

Incomes of farm tenants, particularly in the South, are incredibly low. The tenant families of the Southern plantations have an average net income of $309, or $73 per person for a year's work. Sharecroppers receive $312 per family, or $71 per person, while wage hands obtain an average annual income of only $180 a family.

"Tenant housing is the poorest in the nation, often consisting of two or three-room unpainted shacks with but one thickness of boards. Their customary clothing of patched overalls or faded gingham dresses show that tenants, black and white, get very little of the finished products of the cotton they grow. Their basic diet—fat, cornbread, molasses, and sweet potatoes—has been publicized . . . in a study of the basic causes of pellagra. . . . Women struggle with wash tubs, flat irons heated before open fire-places, "tote" wood and water, work longer in the fiields, and bear more children han any other women in America."

The terrific cost of tenancy in social and economic terms is sometimes hard to picture. Soil erosion has been found to vary directly with the insecurity of the farm operator. Naturally, few tenants exhibit interest in maintaining their farms or restoring soil depletion, since they themselves would receive only incidental benefits from such improvements. Similarly, tenants have done little toward developing community contacts. Many rural schools are disorganized by wholesale changes in pupils around moving time. Tenants are, of course, at a great disadvantage as compared with owners in participating in community affairs. Yet where they have attempted to organize in order to improve their conditions, they have been met with violence and violations of their civil rights.