

WHY I BECAME A COMMUNIST—II

From awareness of democratic struggle to participation in its front ranks. The impact of world war against fascism. Doxey A. Wilkerson continues his saga of a Negro educator.

The following is the second and final article in Doxey A. Wilkerson's story of how he came to be a Communist; the first article appeared in last week's NEW MASSES. On June 19 Mr. Wilkerson, noted Negro educator, resigned his positions as associate professor of education at Howard University and education specialist with the Office of Price Administration to join the Communist Party and become its educational director for Maryland and the District of Columbia. We asked him to tell the readers of NEW MASSES why he took this step. Readers who would like to write Mr. Wilkerson about his articles can address him c/o Communist Party of Maryland, 201-03 W. Franklin St., Baltimore 1, Md.—The Editors.

I SHALL ever cherish the rare academic freedom of Howard University. There I found intellectual stimulation for my developing interest in, and study of socialism as an alternative for our exploitative economy. There also began my interest and activities in the labor movement. Together, these two influences led me to the Communist Party.

My study of socialist theory developed out of my interest in the unique pattern of relationships which obtain among the many races and nationalities of the Soviet Union. The reading of several scientific analyses of Soviet society, together with the testimony of acquaintances who had lived in Russia, opened for me a land from which the conflict of races and nationalities has been completely eliminated. I found that the truly unique constitution of the USSR not only "guarantees" to all citizens a series of economic, cultural, and political rights without parallel in the constitutions of other nations, but it goes on to state precisely how these rights are "ensured." Moreover, of especial interest to me as a Negro American are the provisions of Article 123:

Equality of rights of citizens of the USSR, irrespective of their nationality or race, in all spheres of economic, state, cultural, social and political life, is an indefeasible law.

Any direct or indirect restriction of the rights of, or, conversely, any establishment of direct or indirect privileges for, citizens on account of race or nationality, as well as any advocacy of racial or national exclusiveness or hatred and contempt, is punishable by law.

I discovered that this guarantee of racial and national equality is not merely "the law"; it is universal Soviet practice. Why in the Soviet Union alone? Socialist theory supplied the answers. The Soviet Union

revealed itself to me as socialism in action.

For five or six years now, I have been convinced that socialism represents the necessary ultimate solution not only for the special problems of the Negro people, but for all other major problems of our society—widespread poverty, cyclical depressions and attendant mass unemployment, violations of civil and political liberties, recurring wars. My interest in socialism was paralleled by increasing interest in the labor movement. The two interests reinforced each other. They also led me to active participation in a wide range of progressive mass organizations.

Throughout my stay at Howard University, I was an active member and officer of the Howard Teachers Union. For several years, I was national vice-president of the American Federation of Teachers, AFL. More recently, while employed by the Office of Price Administration, I was an active member of the United Federal Workers of America—CIO. During this entire period, I have come more and more to study the past and current history of American labor, and also to assist with the programs of a number of local unions in which I did not hold membership. As a result of this varied union experience and study, several convictions came to be pretty well fixed.

IN THE first place, I have long been impressed by the basic similarity in the immediate employment problems of workers in widely varying fields. Striking parallels could be drawn, for example, between the difficulties of sharecroppers on the plantation and of professors in the typical college or university. Public school teachers in New York or Atlanta, tobacco workers in Richmond, laundry and cafeteria workers in the District of Columbia, federal and state employees almost everywhere—all tend to be overworked, underpaid, and subject to more or less oppressive working conditions. White and Negro workers, men and women workers, professional, clerical, skilled and unskilled—practically all are threatened with economic insecurity, and subject to crude or subtle intimidations which make them less than free men.

Second, it became clear to me that the solution of the workers' immediate employment problems, regardless of their fields of endeavor, lies in effective union organization. I have seen traditionally exploited tobacco workers organize and win wages superior to those of teachers in the same community. I have seen white and Negro sharecroppers in Louisiana and southern

Missouri join together to make substantial gains toward freedom through the militant tenant-farmers' unions. I have seen teachers made secure in their tenure, hotel and restaurant workers awarded progressive union contracts, and even domestic workers improve their lot—all through the aegis of their unions. Even more frequently, however, I have seen workers of all types held in relative bondage, defeated in their attempts to move forward because they are not organized, or because their organizations are weak and ineffective.

THIRD, I came increasingly to realize that the larger social, economic, and political problems of workers as a class are fundamentally dependent for solution upon the building of a powerful and unified movement of American labor. The industrialists and financiers, the landlords of city and country are organized. And through their dominant economic position and the efficient organization of their class they are able to wield great political influence. It became clear to me that the building of a real democracy in twentieth-century America can come only through powerful organization of the working class.

Fourth, my study and activity in the trade union movement led me to appreciate more fully the relationship between the problems faced by the Negro people and those of the working class as a whole. It became clear to me that there is no separate solution of the Negro question, that the welfare of the Negro people is bound up with that of the entire working class population, and that the key to both is in the building of a strong and democratic labor movement.

Finally, my associations in the trade union and other progressive movements led me to appreciate the role of the Communist Party. Whether I was helping workers to organize, fighting police brutality, lobbying for progressive social legislation, campaigning for equal job opportunities for Negroes, defending teachers from persecution because of their honest convictions—whatever the "cause," I always found Communists among the most constructive, loyal, and energetic sponsors of the movement. Moreover, I came to develop friendships with a number of "known" and "unknown" Party members. Many had academic attainments much superior to my own. Others with less formal education revealed a clarity of political insight, a devotion to principle, and a mastery of organizational forms and procedures that commanded my highest respect. I often

wished that the status of American civil liberties was such that the masses of people could know their indebtedness to the Communists.

As I came to understand the characteristic role of Communists in various organizations, I also came to observe the tactics of other "leftist" groups—the Socialists, Trotskyites, and related sects. I generally found their dominant preoccupation to be attacking the Communists and the Soviet Union, the net effect of their activities disruptive.

Thus my convictions were being molded in ways that would certainly have led me, at some time, to join the Communist Party and devote my life to the furtherance of its program. The war served to hasten my decision.

FROM the beginning this war has profoundly stirred my emotions, for it was so clearly destined, in one way or another, tremendously to affect the welfare of the common people of our nation and the world. For all believers in socialism as the ultimate goal the immediate issue now became: will the peoples of the world fall victims to the ruthless conquest of global fascism, and thus set back for centuries the onward march of mankind?

Prior to the outbreak of war, in league with thousands of progressives in the United States and other countries, I was an ardent advocate of "collective security" to stop the fascist aggressors. It was so clear that a coalition of the major democratic countries—Great Britain, the United States, France, the Soviet Union, and China—represented the only effective means of preventing the fascist conquest of the world. But the dominant imperialist forces of Britain, France, and America, responding to narrow class motivations and to their hatred of the new socialist state, rejected the Soviet Union's plea for collective security. Instead they gave Munich to the world.

I opposed the involvement of our nation in the war unleashed by the pact of Munich. It was clear that the major belligerents were involved in another unprincipled struggle, the ugly fruit of fascist aggression and anti-democratic appeasement. I was not among those who underestimated the power of either Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union. On purely practical grounds, it was clear that American entry into the war without the USSR as an ally would have been but the prelude to disaster for our own nation. In 1939, when but few would listen, Earl Browder had warned: "Sooner or later, and preferably sooner, the United States and the Soviet Union, bound together by ties of common national interests, must, together with like-minded peoples and governments, banish the forces of destruction from the earth, establish orderly international relations, and secure world peace."

Years later, in the blood and smoke of battle, the alliance he then predicted was born. The iron necessities of survival had triumphed over the fateful policies of Munich. The whole character of the war now underwent a fundamental change.

In late June 1941, just a few days after Germany attacked the Soviet Union, I had occasion to write:

"Anglo - American - Soviet cooperation against this latest fascist thrust (precisely as would have been true of a pre-Munich 'collective security' alignment) tends to alter fundamentally the character of the war and of the prospective peace. It means that the national interests of the British and American peoples are coming to triumph over the imperialist (hence, anti-Soviet) class interests of their governments, thus transforming a conflict of rival imperialisms into a real struggle against fascist aggression.

"The interests of the common people throughout the world require genuine and concerted efforts by their governments fully to exploit this opportunity for a decisive defeat of German fascism. In addition to removing the Hitler menace, this would make for the continuance of socialist reconstruction in the USSR (the progressive influence of which extends far beyond the Soviet borders), and assure an important role for the Soviet Union in shaping a non-imperialist 'people's peace.'

"Therefore, it is now more important than ever for the British and American peoples to counteract the influence of the neo-fascist, imperialist appeasers in their own governments, and to force those governments to adhere to foreign and domestic policies which truly express the democratic interests of the masses of people." ("Russia's Proposed New World Order of Socialism," *Journal of Negro Education*, 10:387-419, July 1941.)

This event was truly a "turning point in the world," and mine was but one of the millions of lives it fundamentally altered.

SINCE the summer of 1941, and especially since the United States formally entered the war, my paramount interest has been the promotion of victory. It was evident that all hope of building a free nation and a free world depended utterly upon defeat of the Axis and the complete destruction of fascism. Moreover, I was con-

fident that, in the very course of the struggle, the liberating character which the war had assumed was certain to become increasingly manifest.

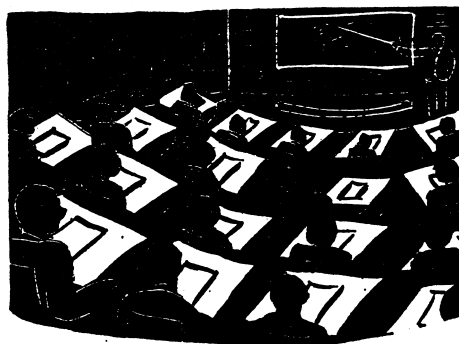
I never assumed, however, that it would do so automatically. I realized that—like victory itself—the progressive goals made attainable by this war would be achieved only through the conscious struggles of the democratic forces of our nation and the world. To the furtherance of these ends, more than to any other cause, the past two years of my life have been devoted.

My academic interests were my first wartime casualties. Several major research projects were put aside "for the duration." Strictly professional pursuits came gradually to be overshadowed by activities relating to the war. By the summer of 1942, the conflict between my activities incident to the building of national unity for victory, on the one hand, and my professional interests and responsibilities, on the other, had reached the point where some readjustment was imperative. It was then that I obtained leave from Howard University and accepted temporary employment with the Office of Price Administration.

My work with OPA was in the Educational Services Branch of the Department of Information. It involved helping schools and colleges throughout the country to organize community-wide programs of wartime consumer education, teaching the masses of citizens the "why" and "how" of price control, rent control, and rationing, and what they must do to make these measures work. For a while, I was challenged by my work with OPA. It afforded expression for both my professional interests and my desire for direct participation in the war effort. I viewed the job, however, merely as an interim occupation prior to military service. Having been classified as "1 A" by Selective Service, and expecting induction at any time, I declined for several months to accept a permanent OPA appointment. I did accept such appointment only after several months of waiting for induction, and when Civil Service refused to authorize continuance of my successive temporary appointments.

Despite the fundamental necessity of OPA's program to the war effort—indeed, because of its importance coupled with the attacks to which it was subjected—I came in time to feel frustrated in my work with the Department of Information. It was clear that profit-seekers-as-usual, together with conscious fifth columnists within our nation, were working for the complete destruction of the price control and rationing programs.

AS I TRAVELED about teaching the people how to use their ration stamps and check prices, I wanted to tell them truths far more fundamental to their lives and the fate of our nation. I wanted to say that consumer action on the economic home



front was not enough; that the crying need was for mass *political action* to defeat the wreckers of our war economy. I wanted to show that the defeatist attacks upon OPA were an integral part of the whole conspiracy against the win-the-war policies of our Commander-in-Chief. I wanted to try to arouse the people to the danger faced by our nation from Hitler's reserve army in our midst, to move them to political action which would secure, not only our wartime economy, but all other sectors of the home front as well.

But these were things which a civil servant of the federal government is not per-

mitted to say. I was impelled to turn elsewhere, away from all "kept" institutions, for effective expression of my zeal for safeguarding our nation from its enemies within. I found my opportunity in the Communist Party.

Long before, I had come to respect the Communist Party and to appreciate its program. In the course of the war, I had seen that party put aside all advocacy of socialism "for the duration" and, to a degree that hardly any other organization can match, throw its entire resources and energies into the war effort of our nation. I saw in the program of the Communist

Party opportunity for the expression of my highest patriotic and social ideals.

In June 1943, having passed the age for military service, I joined the Communist Party and became its educational director for Maryland and the District of Columbia. In so doing, I took a step toward which the experiences of my entire life seemed to point. Not only does it link me organizationally with what I am convinced is the political future of the world, but it also affords me opportunity, during this critical period of history, for maximum service as a civilian to the war effort of our nation.

DOXEY A. WILKERSON.

Slings and Arrows

Richard Wright is now rushing work on a new long novel and a play prior to being inducted into the armed forces. A short novel of his, "The Man Who Lived Underground," is scheduled to be published by Viking soon.

Germans have learned to read between the lines in their press. When South German papers recently reported that somebody had tried unsuccessfully to explode the Rhine bridge to Basel, Rhinelanders dolefully remarked: "It must be Russian guerrillas trying to cut off the enemy's retreat."

Every correspondent wishing to go abroad has to pass four government agencies: the State Department, War Department, FBI, and Naval Intelligence. Some American correspondents stationed abroad also seem to find it difficult to get back home. One of them had to have a high official of a foreign government intercede for him before he was able to return. Correspondents who have trouble getting back find that at some time in the past they were identified with the "wrong" committees—for instance, a committee for Loyalist Spain.

A prominent "question answerer" in the Berlin Ministry of Propaganda, Dr. Erich Weiner, was fired recently and sent east to "atone" for making "defeatist statements" to foreign correspondents.

Crystal gazing and fortune telling have grown widely in Germany. A Department of Occultism has been formed with headquarters in a Munich branch of the Reich's Health Ministry. All spiritualists, palm-readers, etc., must register so that "dangerous forms of occultism with international connections" may be distinguished from those which may be "useful." Media who don't see Nazi victories are sent to work in factories.

The "Hamburger Fremdenblatt" justified this measure as follows: "Experience has shown that due to doubts and disappointments and fears about the fate of their relatives at the front, many people seek refuge in occult practices. It may become dangerous. . . ." Reich soothsayers had been enjoying very profitable returns, but they began to be earnestly combated after Hess flew to Scotland.

Victor Riesel, labor editor of the supposedly pro-Roosevelt New York "Post," has been saying privately that he

favors Willkie in 1944. Riesel is a former editor of the Social Democratic "New Leader" and is close to the right-wing state leadership of the American Labor Party.

Ruth Mitchell's book on the Yugoslav Chetniks, which has come out with a very small sound, has two rather damning pieces of evidence that she, along with Mikhailovich, chose the wrong side. She says she joined the Chetniks at a certain time—and research discloses that they were not even formed on that date. She also praises Gen. Milan Nedich—since exposed as a Serbian quisling.

At the Stork Club recently Assistant Secretary of State Adolph Berle was confronted with these evidences of Miss Mitchell's political aberrations. "Miss Mitchell represents the Pan-Slav movement," he remarked loftily.

Howard Emmett Rogers is now writing the screenplay for the life of Eddie Rickenbacker. Rogers was one of the leading lights of Screen Playwrights, the company union set up in Hollywood several years ago when the writers were organizing into the Screen Writers Guild.

The head of Russian War Relief in Chicago is Count Sergei Alexandrovich Kutuzov, a grandson of the famous General Mikhail Kutuzov, who led Russia's war of liberation against Napoleon. Through his mother, Count Kutuzov is also descended from that other great military figure of Russia's past, General Alexander Suvorov, who in the eighteenth century defeated Frederick the Great of Prussia and led his triumphant armies to Berlin.

Orson Welles, who believes the most urgent task today is to make clear to as many people as possible the issues involved in the worldwide struggle against fascism, is planning a speaking tour in the Middle West. He will also attend the forthcoming congress of the Free World Association in Montevideo, Uruguay.

In the rebroadcast for home consumption of Hitler's latest speech one passage was omitted. This read: "If the German people despair, they will deserve no better than they get. If they despair, I will not be sorry for them if God lets them down."

PARTISAN.