

THE CRISIS OF THE MIDDLE CLASS

A Review of Lewis Corey's Book

By BERTRAM D. WOLFE

At the present historical juncture, the middle class occupies a key position in the strategy of the class struggle. Torn by inner dissension and differentiation, prevented by its very nature and function in society from playing an independent political role, the middle class nevertheless is destined to play a decisive part as an auxiliary troop or mobile reserves, by throwing the bulk of its forces into support of one or the other of the two major classes that are contending today for the domination of society. So long as monopoly capitalism directly or by fascist demagogic subterfuge succeeds in winning the support of the middle class in impending conflicts, it will continue to rule and defeat the forces and check the possibilities of further social progress. If the proletariat succeeds in winning the support of the middle class, it will within a relatively short historical span break thru to victory and a new higher social order. The strategy for harnessing the middle-class—even that proletarianized section which is middle-class only in psychology—onto decaying monopoly capitalism, is the strategy of fascism. The problem of winning the middle class to a perception of the fact that by and large its interests coincide with those of the victory of the proletarian revolution, and that the bulk of its former elements are already proletarianized, is a central problem for the defeat of fascism and the victory of socialism. To ignore the middle class is a sign of proletarian immaturity and a guarantee of proletarian defeat. To woo the middle class by acceptance of its muddled program and illusions, or to surrender to those illusions for fear of "scaring the middle class away", leads to social democratic opportunism, the failure to solve any problems of either middle class or proletariat, and the hurling of the middle class into the strangling embrace of fascism. The Communist International has latterly been vacillating between the pole of sectarianism and the pole of opportunist surrender to the confusions of the petty bourgeois program and ideology for the sake of the "People's Front." All these

business agents if they supported his proposals. Only about 1200 votes were cast in the 6 locals while the 5 Jewish locals cast over 2,500 votes. (3) The Gentile locals voted 787 to 440 for 9 business agents. Not such an imposing majority for locals who "threaten to split the union". Jewish locals voted 2,365 to 188 against 9 business agents.

Is there more need to show that the cry of the Gentile locals wanting to split is a deliberate fake to cover up the C.P.'s dirty deal with Zausner.

The best thing the C.P. can do is to stop giving fake reasons for an intolerable and unheard of maneuver. The best way to get out of the mess is to state frankly that a very bad and most dangerous mistake was made. The progressive workers in the painters and other industries would have much more respect if this were done.

considerations indicate the central strategical importance of a sound analysis of the middle class.

The present work is such an analysis and hence a work of the greatest importance to the middle class in giving it self-knowledge and to the proletariat in aiding it to understand the true position and outlook of its potential allies and unused reserves. It is not limited, as its title might imply, to the present plight of the class it treats, but is a many-sided study of that class' history, heterogeneous composition, ideology, tendencies of development, interests real and imaginary, and relations actual and potential with the two decisive classes whose titanic struggle will by its outcome determine the fate of mankind for a long time to come.

A Comparison

As I was reading Corey's book* there came to me for review Alfred M. Bingham's "Revolt of the Middle Classes" (subtitle of "Insurgent America"—to be reviewed later). A comparison between the two works served admirably to demonstrate the superiority of Marxism as a scientific method of approach to social problems. Bingham is lost in the woods. He is in an unreal world where the proletariat is growing ever more conservative and actually disappearing like the Cheshire Cat in "Alice in Wonderland" leaving nothing behind but a Marxian grimace and growl, while the middle class is getting bigger and bigger and more and more socially significant and the only true bearer of the struggle for socialism and a classless society. Bingham's observations are going out of date (where they had any validity at all) before the ink is dry on the pages of his book. Corey's work on the contrary covers an historical sweep from the birth of the middle class thru its changing role to the present. Its forecasts, because they are based upon a study of actual developmental trends, enable him to predict with reasonable certainty the paths that the middle class will follow in the next historical epoch.

It is not only with Bingham's book that Corey's should be compared. Considering how important the strategical problem of winning the middle class is, the reader would expect a wealth of Marxist literature on the subject. Actually, the total output is meager, fragmentary, in the main superficial, often fallacious, rarely concretized to a study of the actual position of the class in America rather than in Europe or "in general". This serves to enhance the importance of the present work. It was high time that such a detailed and really Marxist study appeared.

Some Weaknesses

Its only weaknesses and they are distinctly minor, are (1) a certain tendency to repetition of the same idea from several different angles, occasionally with

* Published by Covici-Friede. 379 pp., \$2.50.

statistical proof of what has already been proved conclusively without the aid of statistics. This may encourage the inexperienced reader to think that the book is running out of ideas, when the very next page will offer the most fruitful conception yet advanced. (2) A certain lack of concrete application and neglect to use specific errors of other writers as a foil to clarify and point Corey's correct views. Thus he has a far more correct estimate of fascism than Strachey or Dutt, but the reader is likely to miss the "corrections" because they are stated without explicit comparison and emphasis.

Thus, for instance, a single paragraph at the bottom of page 345 dealing with the struggle for the "defense of concrete democratic rights of the workers" and its relation to the fight against fascism, may easily be missed by the reader, whereas if contrasted with the dangerous momentary tendency of the Communist Parties (and permanent insistence of Social Democracy) to fight for decaying bourgeois democracy as such, it would have taken on great significance and hence greater influence. One feels that in this respect a closer association with the practical movement would further enliven and enhance the value of Corey's valuable writings. But even these minor defeats are in large measure but the obverse side of certain corresponding virtues. In a field where there prevails so much confusion it is better to overprove than underprove. And a book between "hard covers" destined for the general book trade, inevitably must avoid much of the polemic of day-to-day controversy. What the author should do now is boil the essence of the present-day part of the work down into a pamphlet or two for more general circulation. That it can be done is proved by Corey's skillful condensation of the main outlines of his major work, "The Decline of American Capitalism" into a single chapter of the present volume. (Chapter IX). That too, should be published as a separate pamphlet.

The "middle class" that Corey chooses to study is much wider and more inclusive than the actual middle class. It includes office workers, technicians, teachers and other types of salaried workers, as well as the middle class proper. This is psychologically sound, since historically these sections of the erroneously called middle class have emerged from that class, and psychologically, have tried to regard themselves as part of it rather than of the proletariat. It is the growing consciousness of this section that it is really proletarian, which is the profoundest sign that the traditional "middle class" is in crisis.

Middle Class In Internal Crisis

Corey shows that the present crisis, coming as it does on the background of the general crisis of capitalism, has not merely temporarily inconvenienced or hurt the "middle class" but has actual-

ly plunged it into an internal crisis from which there is no longer any capitalist recovery.

The author analyzes the contradictory tendencies inherent in its intermediate position which forced it, while defending small property, to defend property in general and pave the way for monopoly which in turn expropriates it and renders it that contradiction in terms, a "propertless middle class." Corey's is no abstract and absolute middle class, but a changing and contradictory conglomerate, held together not by true common interest, but by historical ties, traditions no longer in accord with the facts, illusions, "cultural lag", former origin rather than present position and needs. Theoretically and statistically the work traces the doom of the independent enterprises, the growing proletarianization of professional men, office workers and farmers, while the upper, managerial sections of the "new middle class" identify themselves more and more with the interests of monopoly capitalism which they serve and the exploitation of the office workers and lower paid technicians who are supposedly their brethren. "The upper and lower layers of salaried employees have nothing in common," he writes, "except the term salaried." An attempt to bind these antagonistic elements together in an illusory unity under the leadership of agents of monopoly capital, is an essential strategical objective of fascism. And Corey's work has as a central purpose the contrary objective, the clarification of the antagonisms, the promotion of differentiation inside the so-called middle class, and aid to the great proletarianized and semi-proletarianized majority of the former middle class to find their way into the ranks of the revolutionary army led by the proletariat, where, by position and interests, they rightfully belong. In effect, the present work is a documented analytical manifesto to the great, declassed majority of the American middle class, arousing it to self-knowledge and calling it to battle for its own true interests in close alliance with the proletariat. It contains passages of true eloquence and luminous clarity, and at least one middle-class critic whose review was published in TIME was profoundly moved and shaken out of his normal complacency by the experience of reading it. The problem now is to get the self-tyled "middle class", professionals, teachers, technicians, office workers, mortgage-and-tenant farmers, to read it, as well as the proletarians interested in absorbing its implications for the strategical problems involved in winning their support. It is the most important, the only important work on the significant subject it treats.

JOIN!

Communist Party U. S. A. (Opposition)

For information on
the activity and poli-
cies of the Communist
Opposition write to

COMMUNIST PARTY
(OPPOSITION)
Box 68 Station "U"
New York City