

The Youth Movement and the Sixth Anniversary of the Young Workers (Communist) League

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ON THE occasion of its Sixth Anniversary, the Young Workers (Communist) League finds itself in the process of laying the basis for leadership of the young workers in all their struggles. Though still small in size, and of limited influence, the Young workers (Communist) League, in the recent past, has established itself not only in the eyes of its friends, but also in the eyes of its enemies, as the only youth organization in the ranks of the working class that is worthy of notice. Ever larger numbers of young workers are beginning to look upon the League as their leader, and the League, in turn, is beginning to adopt activities and methods of work that will fit it for leadership. The Young Workers (Communist) League of America is not yet the mass Communist youth organization. It is the basis for and the kernel around which will develop the American Communist youth movement leading the majority of the exploited youth of the country.

Formally, the Young Workers League was founded in May, 1922, at a convention in New York City. But its origin dates back to the days before the war, to the Young Peoples Socialist League. Great as is the difference between the two organizations, the present Communist youth League of America has its roots in Y. P. S. L.

The Young Peoples Socialist League was never a mass organization. It never attained a large size. Its influence was very limited. It participated in no struggles of the young workers. It was at best, a social-educational organization. The membership came largely from the ranks of the students and clerical workers. It had little or no contact with the young workers in the important industries.

NARROW BASIS FOR YOUTH MOVEMENT

There were two reasons for this. Fundamental of course, is the narrow objective basis for a revolutionary youth movement at the time of the Y. P. S. L.; but a secondary reason, not to be overlooked, was the lack of understanding as to the role of the youth movement,

which resulted in a wrong orientation and the failure to take advantage even of whatever favorable circumstances did exist.

The mode of development of American industry was in many ways basically different from the development in Europe. The bulk of the workers were drawn from other countries. The adoption of the latest methods of production was rapid. The development of machinery and large scale industry proceeded at a phenomenal rate. These developments largely caused skill to be discarded. Apprenticeship as a means of training skilled workers became a negligible factor. The main channel for the entry of the youth into industry was as unskilled laborers. Apprenticeship dramatizes the existence of the problem of the youth in industry by demonstrating the special position and needs of the young worker. The absence of apprenticeship tended to conceal the problem of the youth in industry.

While, of course, there were many young workers in industry, their numbers were not so large as might be imagined. The young workers formed only a secondary supply of labor, after the immigrants. Consequently, the small proportion of young workers, the absence of a dramatizing factor, served to relegate the youth problem in the ranks of the working class to the background. The same factor which kept the proportion of young workers in industry small, tended to make the proportion of young people in non-industrial occupations—clerical, agricultural—large, so that the main orientation of the young people before the war was not toward entering industry as workers, and becoming members of the working class, but toward entering the so-called “white collar” occupations with hopes of rising above the working class. The illusions created by the opening of the West and the constant expansion of industry contributed to this state of mind.

The United States underwent a very rapid development—but this development was essentially within its own borders, consequently not necessitating large military forces. That is how the myth of the “peacefulness” of the United States originated. The Y. P. S. L. in the United States did not even speak of the anti-militarist struggle, which in Europe was one of the cornerstones of the Socialist youth movement.

Thus, while in Europe, Socialist youth leagues developed through the struggle of the apprentices for better economic conditions (Germany) through the fight of the youth against militarism (Belgium) and also to a certain extent against the growing reformism in the ranks of the Socialist movement, in the United States the Young Peoples Socialist League was born through force of imitation of

the European movement and from the need of the Socialist Party for a "water boy" in its various activities. In Europe, by 1900, there were already fairly well-established Leagues. In the United States there was not even one group.

What was the pressing issue that compelled the Y. P. S. L. after seven years of peaceful slumber to hold a convention in 1912? Did it feel the necessity of examining the position of the American youth and adopting measures to improve them? Was it because the Socialist youth movement had suddenly awakened to a consciousness of its role? No! The convention was based on the general crisis in the Socialist movement and the necessity of the Y. P. S. L. adopting an attitude toward this crisis. The convention itself did not understand what had been the driving force that brought it into existence. It passed a few superficial resolutions, "greeted" the proletarian revolutions in Russia and Hungary, and went home.

It failed miserably to show the path that the Socialist youth movement was to follow.

TOWARDS A MASS LEAGUE

While at the present time, the path followed by the Young Workers (Communist) League forms a sharp angle to that followed by the Y. P. S. L. before the war, the turn was not made without painful transitions. There is no political continuity between the pre-war and the present youth movement. In Europe, the Communist Youth Leagues are the bearers of the revolutionary tradition of the pre-war Socialist Youth Leagues. In America, there were no revolutionary traditions to be inherited. Only in 1917 was a shred of revolutionary activity evident in the beginning of anti-war work. The Youth movement went through the stages of underground sect, educational groups, Communist propaganda circles and finally genuine Communist Youth League in bewilderingly rapid succession. These necessary changes were many times so abrupt as to leave large sections of the organization outside its ranks.

One feature is outstanding in and runs through all these stages. The movement had no definite idea of its goal. As late as the middle of 1919, when the Left Wing had already largely won the bulk of the Socialists in the country to the ideas of the Russian Revolution, and was very rapidly generating organizational power for the establishment of the Communist movement, the Secretary of the Y. P. S. L. still wrote that the youth movement was purely educational in character and must have nothing to do with politics. This conception lasted for a long time, through the Independent Y. P. S. L. and into the Young Workers League.

The split with Socialism was not based on youth issues, not even on concrete American issues, but on the general, international issue, and at the beginning, we had the spectacle of two youth leagues, one Communist and the other Socialist, carrying on practically the same activity and differing only in allegiance to a political party. Their differences were the differences between the two adult Parties.

The first convention of the Young Workers League, held in New York, May, 1922, after many vicissitudes for the youth movement, was not really a founding convention. It did not adopt a youth program, it did not lay the basis for the organizational consolidation of the revolutionary youth movement. But it was of tremendous significance, nevertheless. It definitely established, even though in an unclear way, the political unity of the working class, with the Communist Party as its leader. It killed the theory of independence which in America was a danger that could not be overlooked, in view of the large student element within the League. It was only at the second convention that the League really first got a hold on itself, when a youth program was adopted. This was the first time in the history of the American youth movement that a youth organization had a youth program!

Y. C. I. LEADS

Did all these developments take place as a result of the inherent power of the youth movement? Hardly.

There is no doubt that if the youth movement had depended upon its own powers, it would either have degenerated in the direction of social democracy, or disintegrated altogether. At every critical point, it was the influence, experience and assistance of the international revolutionary youth movement, organized in the Communist Youth International that was the deciding factor in pushing the American youth movement along the right road. It was the prestige of the Communist Youth International that made it possible to gather the best elements from the Y. P. S. L. into the Young Workers League. It was the pressure of the Communist Youth International that caused the adoption of a youth program at the Second convention in 1923, and it was the Communist Youth International that showed the League the path toward the young workers through the application of this youth program to the concrete American conditions. The resolution adopted at the February, 1926 plenum of the Executive Committee of the Communist International is certainly the most important document so far in the history of the League. It opened up new vistas for the revolutionary

youth movement, which have not been completely explored to this very day. The resolution served to crystallize the sentiment that had developed within the ranks of the League for mass activity, and gave that sentiment a definite channel of expression.

The Fourth National Convention of the League held in New York, November, 1927, was undoubtedly the best in the history of the youth movement. This convention undertook the most thorough analysis of the position of the young workers and the factors affecting them. The stimulus from this convention very definitely resulted in throwing the League into mass activity and bringing it up sharply against the new conditions facing the young workers.

What are these changes we have spoken about? They began largely as a result of the war. During the war itself, youth became a factor in industry as a result of the conscription of the older people. The end of the war brought about restriction in immigration, cutting off the main supply of labor for American industries. The youth had to fill this need. The industrialization of the South, the rationalization process which assumed such a rapid tempo after the war, the agrarian crisis but strengthened this general tendency.

From a "peaceful" country, the United States has become one of the most militaristic. The militarization of the youth is proceeding at a rapid pace, both through the usual military form as well as through "special American methods," C. M. T. C., R. O. T. C., etc. The young workers are already feeling the pressure of this militarization process.

We can sum up as follows: Before the war, the young workers formed a small proportion and were not crystallized from the general mass of the non-industrial youth. Today, the proportion of young workers is rapidly growing and the process of crystallization is already fairly well advanced.

In the general development of the League, the Party has played a considerable role. However, this has not been through conscious and direct efforts to guide the League as a youth organization, but as a result of the general political development of the Party itself. The various stages that the Party went through were reflected in one form or another in the League—underground sectarianism— isolation—etc. The breaking of the Party from these various negative features inevitably resulted in similar corrections in the work of the League. However, just as the League did not understand at the beginning that the Party is the political leader of the entire working class, including the young workers, so the Party did not understand that the Party was also the leader of the young workers

as a section of the working class, of the League as the organization of the working youth, and must build the League as a means of winning the working youth for the class-struggle, at the same time helping the League adopt correct policies, not only in its relation to the Party, but also toward the broad masses of the young workers. Naturally, with a historical background such as has been described here, it was very easy to underestimate the importance of the young workers in the class struggle, and the role of the League in the revolutionary movement.

The League has made tremendous progress in the last six months or so. In fact, it is recognized that at no time in its history has it developed at so rapid a pace, not merely from the viewpoint of organizational strength, securing new members, etc., which is very important, but particularly in its orientation toward the basic struggles taking place, and in its correct analysis regarding the perspective for future activity.

It can safely be said that the League in America is finally on the road to a mass League. If the League will keep its ear to the ground, react properly to changes, participate actively in struggles, develop its initiative, avoid internal differences; and if it will secure the proper kind of support from the Party and the Left Wing, it will emerge from the struggles as the real leader of the American young workers in the fight against the capitalist system.

