

When D.W. Editor Said Yes

By H. W. BENSON

The symposium on Hungary and the Middle East at Community Church on December 4 (reported in *LA* last week) was of more than passing interest; it was a political event of real significance.

One of the participants, John Gates, was editor of the *Daily Worker*. Another was Max Shachtman, chairman of the Independent Socialist League. For the first time, a top leader of the Communist Party was ready to debate with a left-wing socialist critic of Stalinism, an opponent of Russian dictatorship.

That alone would be noteworthy, for the CP up to now has adamantly refused to test its line in public against the arguments of Third Camp socialism; it took refuge in epithets, rejecting debates with those whom it freely called "fascists" and "class-enemies."

In his presentation, Gates remained scrupulously within the limits of current official CP policy, but by his very presence he threw the old attitude toward left-socialist opponents into the wastebasket.

There was more than his mere presence; there was also his tone. Not that Gates departed from the official line of his party's national Committee majority; his defense of CP policy was aggressive and firm if deliberately selective. But the attitude toward his critics on the platform was something new.

Any member of the CP, or any sympathizer, would leave the hall with this feeling: Gates did not give in to Shachtman; he rejected the views of the ISL; but he treated his critics as though they and he belonged within the same working-class or socialist "camp."

Soon after the symposium, the *Daily Worker* reprinted the complete text of Gates' remarks. This might seem surprising for it was unusual. His speech was not particularly significant in content or novel in fundamental line.

It would appear that Gates was guarding against party opponents who might point to his participation in the meeting as a sign of "softness" toward outside party critics. To them, he seems to prepare this reply: There is my speech word for word; what was wrong with it?

But at one important stage of the discussion, Gates went beyond his self-imposed role as official party spokesman. Earlier in the discussion, he was asked by Shachtman, "How do you determine the will of the Russian people?" and he replied that they had expressed their will through their support of the Russian Revolution of 1917—and so on. So far, nothing new. Shachtman sharply refuted this answer insisting that Gates take a position on the democratic rights of oppositionists in Russia.

But Gates had no chance for rejoinder until a question was posed from the audience to him: "Would you favor free elections in Communist countries, including freedom for capitalist parties?" He replied in one word: "Yes."

The answer was brief but its significance should not be missed. This is the first time that a leading member of the CP has come out for free elections in countries dominated by Communist Party governments, elections in which *capitalist parties* as well as others could freely participate.