

# HOWARD FAST'S Picture of the American CP

By MAX MARTIN

Thousands of people have broken with and left the American Communist Party since the Twentieth Congress of the Russian CP. Other thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, had parted ways with Stalinism in the decade preceding February, 1956.

The question arises: what are these people thinking and feeling now? What is their attitude towards Communism and towards Moscow? What are their general political ideas?

No spokesman for the thousands of ex-Communists has come forward, no one can be regarded as the representative of those who have broken with Stalinism. For one thing, nobody has yet tried to rally the ex-Communists into a movement or to gather them around a political program. And for another, they undoubtedly are not homogeneous in their thinking; a number of different views and outlooks can be found among them.

Howard Fast is probably the best known of those who have broken with Moscow and left the CP during the recent period. A relatively popular writer, Fast had for years been the last remaining intellectual or writer of note in the Communist movement. His defection constituted a blow to the CP, in terms both of its individual and symbolic impact.

Since the announcement of his break

with the CP early this year Fast has expressed himself on a number of occasions on his thinking about his rupture with Stalinism. He has written a book on the matter which will be published shortly. In the meantime, a lengthy article of his, "The Writer and the Commissar," has appeared in the first issue of the new magazine, *Prospectus*. It can undoubtedly be regarded as a summing up of his outlook to date. His views are of interest not only because of their individual value, but because they may represent the ideas of many others.

Fast informs us that for years he had held doubts about various aspects of Communism and that he had been regarded by the party bureaucracy as an undependable and uncontrollable element. He details various struggles between himself and the CP cultural commissars over "deviations" and "heresies" the latter had found in his works. The catalyst

for his break with the CP, however, was the Khrushchev denunciation of Stalin. He writes, "Only with his contribution, out of the first and largest Communist Party on earth, did all the bits of the puzzle fall into place."

He describes the impact of Khrushchev's speech on the Gates group. "Within the party, and particularly on the *Daily Worker*, the reports of the Twentieth Congress had come as an explosive force of mental liberation . . . because there appeared the first trace of iconoclasm in any party congress in our memory. It was little, but it was enough for us on the *Worker* to seize sledges and begin to break the hateful images with the zest of a drowning man gulping air. Everyone on the staff joined in, to one extent or another. Myself, I struck out in every direction with a joy I had not known for years."

How did the leadership of the CP react? "Throughout all this, because they had never coped with thought, ideas, change, or the excitement of shattering a worthless and senile idea, the national leaders of the party were silent. We had the feeling that they had crawled into holes to hide from the tempest that was blowing through the intellectual corridors of the communist world. . . . Finally, they spoke. Not ideas, not change, but a whining attempt to remove John Gates from the paper and expel him from the party."

## GATES GROUP DOOMED

The Gates faction, says Fast, was doomed to defeat. A substantial number of its adherents including himself, he explains, felt that the only logic of the situation was to liquidate the party. These presumably have since left it. In so doing, says Fast, they aided the defeat of Gates. Yet for them no other course was possible.

Others, equally appalled by what the Twentieth Congress had revealed about Stalinism, felt that they had to stay with the CP, despite its nature and leadership. With reference to a specific Detroit Communist worker who typifies this grouping, Fast writes: "With the party in existence, he could hope that it would change; but with the party liquidated, where could he go?"

Fast is excellent in describing the anti-democratic nature of the functioning of the CP, which prevailed until the Gates upsurge. "The membership discussion itself is guided by the paid section functionaries, whose major task is to kill an opposition to the resolution—even if steps towards expulsion are taken; and while the discussion may continue for weeks, it is all sound and fury. The result, finally, is *always* in the precise line of the original resolution, with only enough formal variations for the membership to reject the idea that they have been made fools of."

He depicts also the servility, the fawning, the stultifying intellectual atmosphere which has generally pervaded the party. He relates the information given him by Communists from the satellite countries of Eastern Europe on conditions there; the privileges enjoyed by the rulers and the crumbs received by the people. He discusses the special problems faced by the writers and artists of the CP.

Where is Fast going and what perspective does he have? It is clear from the article that Fast conceives the answers to these questions in general terms. "For me, the destination has remained unchanged—total brotherhood of man, a world-wide entity of love and creativity, in which life is neither wasted nor despised." He stands for a democratic and humanistic socialism. But he does not translate this aim into a concrete political outlook.

Fast remains true to the ideals which brought him into the Communist movement and is filled with outrage at the reality of Communism which he has at long last apprehended. The feelings and ideas of Fast and those like him who have broken with Stalinism represent a stage in the development of a democratic socialist perspective for the future. They constitute a good beginning.

## CROSSCURRENTS

### Chicago Debate on "Free Enterprise or Socialism"

Chicago, November 13

"Free Enterprise or Socialism" was the topic of a debate held last night before an audience of around 500 in downtown Chicago, sponsored by the E. V. Debs Forum (organized by individuals of various views, including supporters of the *American Socialist* magazine). The contenders were J. Bracken Lee, president of For America, former governor of Utah and right wing "crackpot" pro-capitalist, and Harold Braverman, co-editor of the *American Socialist*.

The audience was predominantly composed of Lee-supporters and enthusiasts. They cheered, stood solemnly and clapped, laughed, and called out lustily from the audience throughout the meeting. On the whole they appeared upper middle-class, mostly older people, and wholly ignorant of politics. Socialism, they and Lee were convinced, was merely a clever conspiracy on the part of those who could not otherwise buy their own home and car to steal it away from those who already have them!

#### ANARCHIST

Lee began with a 30 minute presentation in which he attacked all monopolies, ripped into Democratic and Republican parties for socialistic measures, argued for freedom of the individual and called to a return to the only perfect human document the Constitution. He gave in large measure the speech of an absolute anarchist—opposed to all government as inherently evil, for the individual free man unfettered by social restrictions. But he presented only half of the anarchist's program—the part aimed at cutting down the power of organized labor and ending government restriction on business practices.

Braverman's reply was, especially under the circumstances, restrained and well-mannered. He pointed out that free enterprise is a misnomer and hasn't existed in this world for many years. What we have today is monopoly capitalism, because our economy and technology have made ridiculous the older and freer forms of capitalism.

He went on to detail the problems of capitalist society—of depressions, wars, unemployment, taxation, etc. The trend toward greater government intervention described by Lee, has not abolished capitalism, said Braverman, but it is the trend of the future and will eventually lead to socialism. Today it is only creeping there, but Braverman placed himself in favor

of a galloping trend as preferable in many ways. Greater government ownership is essential for the future, he argued, because it alone is in keeping with contemporary economic and technological forms, and because it is juster that the government own what is produced by all than a few greedy individuals.

In the question and rebuttal period Braverman noted that he did not desire the type of socialism presently existing in East Germany, Eastern Europe, Russia or even China. However, just as capitalism has its different forms (some democratic and some totalitarian), and just as pro-capitalists can attempt to change certain aspects of their society, so he favored changes in these socialist societies and was sure that the working people in these countries would take greater democracy for themselves.

Though Braverman's presentation throughout this debate was by far the more competent and well organized, one important thing was missing. While Lee paraded his freedom-loving instincts, and shouted about individualism, Braverman made only passing reference to the relationship between socialism and individual liberty, self-expression and democratic rights. And just as liberal pro-capitalists were weakened in their effective appeal during the '30s by the common association of capitalism with fascist economics, so Braverman is hurt by the association of Russia with socialism. He never differentiated his type of socialism from any kind of "government" control, ownership or intervention.

In fact Braverman permitted himself to be identified with all those world trends which Lee attacked—the trends identified with increasing bureaucratization, governmentalism, statism, conformity and restrictiveness. That these trends also represent a major enemy to socialist development and an alternative to it was ignored or in effect denied.

Thus while Lee appeared a fool and a demagogue, and Braverman a reasonable and intelligent man, the duel was not one over socialist values or socialist objectives. Braverman sided himself with modern history and technology, which demands coordination, social harmony and planning; Lee sided with the past which demanded unrestricted competition and a *lassiz-faire* government. Democracy? Freedom? Self-expression? Dignity? Lee argued about them, with tongue in cheek. Braverman, unfortunately, didn't even give them lip service.