

THE MEMBERSHIP'S OPINION

The rank and file members of the Communist Party do not share the confidence of the leadership that formulation of new theories will resolve the party crisis.

Responding to its readers' demands, for the first time in its history, the *Daily Worker* has opened its columns to a free expression of opinions. Hundreds of communications have been sent to the paper by members of the party and sympathizers. The Krushchev revelations unleashed a free and unprecedented democratic discussion.

Initial expressions of chagrin, anger and despair were followed by sober questioning and reasoned analysis. Generally, the rank and file letters reject pat explanations, grandiloquent theorizing and superficial self-criticism. Many of the members' comments are couched in straightforward language contrasting sharply with the cliché-ridden, special verbiage accepted as "proper Marxist talk" by the leadership. For reasons of security most of the letters appearing in the newspaper have been anonymous. The letters pose basic questions. The following selections are characteristic of the comments:

"Can we transform our party or shall we orientate on building something new? Can we be effective in building something new without as a preliminary transforming our party and ourselves? How can we transform ourselves? Do we have it within ourselves or are we so far gone that it is hopeless—and the job will have to be done by others than ourselves?"—Frank Carlson, August 26.

"The leaders made themselves synonymous with the party and ideas and viewpoints of individual members were disregarded and suppressed. Unfortunately, basing itself on the wrong concept that leadership was infallible, the majority of the membership went along with this situation although there was a general feeling of dissatisfaction. . . . Communist party isolation is not due chiefly to the adverse objective situation as claimed by Dennis in his report but to the isolation of the leadership from the membership and from the American people, the middleclass composition of the party, the low ideological level and lack of criticism and self-criticism. Therefore the talk of ending our isolation without at the same time giving serious consideration to making changes in a leadership

which is isolated not only from the masses but from the party membership is simply to lay the groundwork for a new series of errors."—George Samson, July 15.

"Our decline is not attributable to objective factors exclusively. . . . But in the Dennis report, which is supposed to cover ten years, there is no singling out of this and no analysis. Apparently, we are sectarian because we are isolated and isolated because we are sectarian. Where does this get us?"—Gene, June 24.

Calls by members "to rectify errors never even received the benefit of a discussion. Everyone had to depend on his individual or small group analysis. Now the errors are being evaluated without us. The little men who weren't there have figured things out by talking to themselves—without the trade union members."—Upper Eastside (of New York City) party organization, September 23.

"Foster's article reveals that the gap between leadership and membership is continuing. . . . The only thing we feel alarmed over is the fact that the leadership in the present discussion seems to be perpetuating a method of work that produced our isolation in the first place."—A.T., August 19.

"The Communist Party is headed by leaders whose working and living experience is too unrelated to the American norm. They speak a strange and sterile language. Many of them are incapable of identifying themselves and being genuinely sympathetic with the real problems and dreams of working people. The leaders have surrounded themselves with friendly, uncritical lieutenants, a sort of impregnable family circle. This prevents the membership from asserting itself and the correct policy to emerge."—an anonymous article, "The Cult of the Bureaucrat," August 21.

"I believe that most of the shopworkers and sympathizers of the Communist Party in Michigan look on the party leadership warily. Many workers in some of the biggest shops strongly resist having anything to do with the organized party leadership. It would be profoundly wrong to think that most of these workers are cowardly or economists. . . . They . . . strongly believe that the present party leadership, organization and methods are not suited to the workers and the problems they encounter."—a Detroit party member, September 2.

"There is mutual suspiciousness, a low ideological level, a lack of self-analysis and criticism and a stifling atmosphere in the party."—a group of Chicago workingclass party youth.

A steelworker criticizes the leaders for their tendency to believe they influence events by mere statements. He further criticizes their isolation and their failure to pool the experience of party members. "In essence there exist two Communist Parties, one of the leadership and one of the rank and file in shops."—September 15.

"In the recent strike of 650,000 steel workers, Communist shopworkers in our area played a modest but noteworthy role . . . but our section found itself in sharp disagreement with the formulations by the state and national leadership. . . . As a result, our section received virtually no concrete help from either the state or national leadership. . . . No officer of the leadership felt the strike was important enough to meet or consult with our section. . . . We sent a seven page typewritten criticism to the (Steel) Commission, but it failed to discuss or publicize it. Their action in merely ignoring our differences is a most flagrant example of disregard for the thinking of the membership. . . . This is a sharp example of undemo-

cratic practices in the most important area of our party's work."—staff of a Steel Section, September 23.

A Gary steelworker recognizes the role of objective factors in limiting the effectiveness of the party—"after all, the steelworkers haven't had a wrinkle in their belly for 17 years" and it was "impossible to publicly identify oneself as a Communist because it would mean firing from the mill and expulsion from the union." He writes that workers have been urged to abandon their independent, Communist position and to go along with the union leadership. But he rejects such a position, declaring: "The workers expect us to be the most active, most advanced, most honest thinking trade unionists even if they are not yet ready to go along with us."—September 16.

"I suddenly felt the ground was shaking under my feet. . . . I was facing possible expulsion after 27 years of Communist Party membership." The writer reported being ignored, slandered and denounced by the leadership for writing a theoretical article which the leadership disapproved of and refused to publish. The leadership, he added, had not taken a single step "to correct inner-party violations and abuses."—J.K., September 16.

"Comrades who were removed without sufficient explanation became very bitter and withdrawn. Many did not feel free to express their opposition to bureaucratic leaders."—Los Angeles trade unionist, August 19.

"Invariably the fight against one main danger has thrown us into the arms of the other danger; whereupon we have a new main danger, the fight against which then throws us back into the lesser danger; and which in turn becomes the main danger again. Onesidedness is fought with othersidedness."—Jim West, July 29.

"Bureaucracy is so ingrained as a method of work in

many of our leaders that they are genuinely unconscious of it, do not even understand it when it is pointed out to them. . . . Let the leaders become real club members, pay their dues, see problems from the bottom as well as the top. Let them go to work again, rub shoulders with reality."—A.S.T., August 10.

Although many of the letters do comment on the theoretical proposals of the leaders, most correspondents emphasize their personal experiences in or with the party. There is recognition that better living and working conditions and the cold war repression were in great part responsible for the loss of party influence and more than eighty per cent of the membership. Disregard of American traditions and subservience to Soviet party methods are also mentioned.

But few members accept the leadership's contention that the severe decline in party strength can be attributed primarily to objective conditions and theoretical errors. The decline, some note, began in 1946 before the "objective conditions" of the boom and the cold war repressions. The members do not criticize the leadership sharply for wrong predictions and lack of clairvoyance in regard to the national economy. Some show impatience with leaders who are now engaged in predicting paths of future social development. These members claim such theorizing detracts attention from the party's immediate problems.

Significantly, the vast majority of the letter writers emphasize the decay of the leadership and the bureaucracy in the party and the cleavage and antagonism between leaders and members as the prime causes for the decline of the party.

The membership demands a frank exposure of inner-

party weaknesses and especially of the ossification of the leadership. The Draft Resolution, on the other hand, discusses this problem only cursorily. Approximately seventy-five per cent of the Resolution is devoted to a review of the domestic and world situation, more than twenty per cent to theoretical errors and only two per cent to bureaucracy and leadership weaknesses. The document merely refers to "wrong concepts of leadership having discouraged full and free participation of membership in the discussion of policy and tactics" and calls upon the forthcoming Convention to "abolish this bureaucratic method of work." The leadership partially disavows its own responsibility by declaring that these bureaucratic approaches had "been accentuated in part by the mechanical application of certain principles of organization adopted by other Communist parties"—that is, imported from abroad.

In his analysis of the party situation, William Z. Foster devotes only a few lines to the possible role of bureaucracy in the leadership in the decline of the party. He attributes the adverse mood of the people toward the Communist Party chiefly to enemy propaganda and warns against the danger of an anti-leadership attitude.

Thus both the right and the left wing leaders virtually ignore the opinions of the membership regarding causes of the party's decline.

Although differing on theoretical issues both the right and left wing are in agreement that the Draft Resolution presents "a good program of practical work." This strange agreement derives from the long-standing divorce of practice from theory within the American Communist Party. The Draft Resolution makes generalizations about "mass work" and sets forth spectacular plans for anti-monopoly

coalitions, but it avoids outlining new tactics and approaches or organizational changes for broadening party activities.

The principal contradiction between the interests of the monopolies and of the American people will revolve around the growing threat of an economic crisis and the means for resolving such a crisis once it breaks out. This and related issues, such as the dangers inherent in the continued, vast armament expenditures provide the basis for a popular anti-monopoly movement. Such a movement, however, will not be generated merely by reciting paeans to American democratic traditions. Rhetoric cannot be a substitute for persistent, patient grassroots activities among the people.