

A Communication

By Joseph Starobin

TO THE EDITORS:

Allow me, simply for the sake of the historical record, to comment on those references to my views which appear in five separate articles by leaders of the American Communist Party in *Political Affairs*, October and November, 1956.

I am much indebted, first of all, to William Z. Foster. He now confirms what was only a hint in my letter to *The Nation* for August 25, 1956. He reveals that proposals for some basic changes in Party policy and practices were put forward quite some time ago by myself, and independently, by Joseph Clark. It was not "early in 1954," as Foster now remembers it, but half a year before, shortly after we returned from our newspaper posts in Peking and Moscow. In fact, my own views began to take shape in a series of private letters to colleagues on *The Worker*, and to Party leaders, beginning in 1951.

What was this "first serious element of political confusion in the Party," as Foster now calls it without explaining why he took so long to expose it and how it was dealt with? In his view (October, 1956 *Political Affairs*) Clark and I considered "the Party's fight against the war danger both wrong and fruitless," and this is supposed to have led us into nothing less than "shielding American imperialism from attack," undermining the "hard-pressed Party's morale," etcetera.

No proof is offered for such grave charges. Without taking space for a

chapter and verse analysis, I can only point out that no one thought the Party's fight against war was wrong. Like so many others, I took a whole-hearted part in it, and served throughout 1950-51 as secretary of the Party's national commission on peace activities, a time when some achievements were registered. What I began to consider wrong, for the very reason that it impeded these peace activities, was a conception of post-war development that might be called "cataclysmic."

A theory dominated the Party's work that no matter what happened, the only way out for American imperialism was world war. If the imperialists had their way, they would make war; if they were blocked, they would do so out of desperation. The Party became permeated by a sort of "headline mentality"—a concept that it was always "high noon"—which made it hard to distinguish the real trend of events. Instead of confidence in winning the peace, a definite hysteria took hold.

It does not seem to have occurred to Party leaders among whom Foster was the most influential that if imperialism had its way, why would it have to make war? Perhaps it might be striving to achieve some objectives without war? Or that, if imperialism were blocked, there might be a truce, or even a settlement. It was also possible that the decisive circles of American capitalism, faced by many-sided obstacles, still retained enough confidence in themselves to enter into

peaceful competition, instead of a project as dangerous as world war. The Party became so accustomed to abstract denunciation of imperialism, as a substitute for practical political action, that the concept of being able to impose a period of peace prior to the transformation of imperialist relations was viewed as heretical doctrine.

My own view was that the nature and scope of tempo of the cold war were being misjudged. The real relationship of world forces, arising out of the defeat of the Axis, was proving stronger than all the attempts to reverse that relationship. New factors were operating—such as the end of the atom bomb monopoly, the Chinese Revolution, the rise of a world consciousness for peace—all of which had developed, it should be noted, by 1951.

It was never a matter of minimizing how aggressive were many forces in American life, nor denying the rightness of making the issue of peace the central aspect of the Party's work; it was a matter of recognizing that the cold war was not necessarily a prelude to world war but a struggle to determine the terms of some kind of settlement, within the framework of which the rivalry of the systems would continue peaceably, though not automatically or smoothly. I said this in many ways at that time. The Party's own Draft Resolution of September, 1956, like the Dennis report last April, now admits the misjudgment and recognizes it as a crucial aspect of the Party's deep-rooted sectarianism.

Who really considered the Party's fight against war fruitless? Consider the "Operation Security" which engulfed the whole Party from 1950 until 1956—the attempt to combine some sort of "underground" with the fight

for legality. What did it mean to the Party membership and to the world? It was a definitive political judgment that the Party's fight against war until then had been fruitless. More, it was an estimate that the whole world campaign for peace was likely to be so fruitless that within a short time the only way to maintain an American Communist movement would be through an "underground."

I make no abstract comment on the need for "security," which might have been accomplished in many ways. Nor do I cast a shadow on the personal courage and selflessness of the leaders and the cadres of this enterprise, and their families, just as I mean no personal reflection on Foster himself. But it was a testimonial to fruitlessness. It stemmed from Foster's way of seeing things. Many may have thought they were in step with a world outlook. Perhaps a better perspective on this whole era will show the American Communist Party contributed as much to the misunderstanding of American reality elsewhere as did foreign Communists to the misunderstanding from which the American Party suffered. Perhaps the real disservice to international solidarity was the responsibility of American Communists.

The famous "war danger" issue was only one aspect—in fact only the form—of a conflict of views which come under the heading of what Foster now calls "Americanization." The conviction had been growing in me over many years that the strategy and tactics of other Communists were simply not valid for this country, that we had specific—yes, exceptional—conditions. I felt that little progress was possible without a clear break with the habits of thought and the system of leader-

ship, carried over from the bygone era of the Communist International in which so many leaders and members had been shaped.

I do not claim to have had a fully-fashioned outlook to this effect, only elements of it. Nor did I return home in August, 1953 with more than an inkling of the crisis maturing in the Soviet Union. But I did feel strongly that by 1953 the war danger had plainly receded so that even those who oversimplified it in 1951 could see it; hence it was urgent to re-examine all policies and practices quickly. To those who needed to read the zodiac signs in the world Communist firmament, the events of that year should have been persuasive; my feeling was that the American Party had every warrant to act on its own policies, independently and autonomously. If the Party could not take its own initiatives, the very fact of acting only after others did would continue outmoded relationships in a disastrous way.

Why were Clark and myself so impatient, and not-a-little stubborn? Because it was perfectly clear that a deadlock in leadership had prevailed ever since 1945. Many Party leaders had hesitated over the "way-out-in-left-field" policies, relating them not to the "war danger" thesis but other considerations. Many realized that after 1945, the Party might have gone back, so to speak, to 1935—when American Communists did some real things and helped our people solve real problems: to return to 1925 was "out of this world."

But there was always a well-defined group around Foster, more dynamic than any other, which waved "the bloody shirt" of "Browderism" at every opinion contrary to their own.

Many who opposed them thought the rough edge could be taken off Foster's views; others believed a mistaken course could be corrected if "managed" properly. Yet they were driven, often against their better judgment, along a ruinous path.

This inner paralysis was continuing in 1953. When Clark's views, and then my own, were made available to Party leaders on some levels, they said they agreed and that they had reached the same conclusions. Nonetheless, it seemed to me that nothing was being done. These men were the real Fabians, as they had been for many years.

Foster is mistaken when he speaks of a "disruptive agitation." There was so little "agitation" that the rank and file and most leading people knew nothing about this conflict until late in 1956. Neither did Foster and his aides invite much discussion; and thus a situation was created, to use a famous phrase, "nasty, brutish, and short." My protest was a refusal to re-register. The whole experience raised the deepest moral and political issues, calling into question long-time loyalties to ideals and friends. I understand very well that this dilemma was not unusual. It is now admitted that hundreds, if not thousands, of Party members suffered ostracism, threats of expulsion, and more, for voicing independent proposals or balking a sectarian course.

My activities thereafter were confined to writing and lecturing on the Left, which I considered an obligation. Perhaps other men, returning from jail and elsewhere, would face up to their responsibilities. In any case, it was for the Party itself to tell the story. By the Spring of 1955, the Soviet-Yugoslav reconciliation — which really anticipated the Soviet Twentieth

Congress—raised questions about Socialist development far more basic than the old “war danger” debate. By then, history was proving very dramatically who had been right and wrong. It turned out that some Party leaders, who had made their own reappraisals in jail, were not able to take the helm of change prior to the Soviet Congress, though they tried to. Others did not even then recognize the issues. And the Congress itself deflected the American debate to a terrain which was unfavorable as much as it was favorable.

It is certainly true that a new spirit blows in the *Daily Worker*, and a genuine search for a new course exists in some Party levels. But the mountainous labors that brought forth so little during the crucial Spring and Summer of 1956 only reflected the deep contradictions in the Party leadership, its lack of candor and political courage. This finally decided me that whatever I could contribute on the Left would have to be done differently than in the past.

In the same October, 1956 *Political Affairs*, Eugene Dennis takes issue with various negative attitudes toward the Communist Party and says: “Still others, such as Starobin, invite us to ‘disband,’ ‘fade away,’ and thus allegedly ‘facilitate the emergence of a new party of Socialism.’” If Dennis was quoting me, I do not know where he got the words. They are nowhere to be found in the *Nation* letter. Herbert Aptheker, who has a rather more serious reputation for scholarship than Dennis, also has me believing (in the November 1956 issue) that the Party should be dissolved. He differs from Dennis in placing no quotes around his own misunderstanding. I regret that

Steve Nelson shares a similar view, though in a more tentative way.

It does not seem to have occurred to these commentators that the *Nation* letter was not written to them, but to a Mr. Benjamin of San Francisco who believed that the revival of a new Left depended on the Party’s self-dissolution. My reply was that Benjamin oversimplified on two counts. I challenged him to take steps toward a revival of the Left irrespective of what the Communists do about their own Party; I urged him to do so without “a lamentation of how fine everything would have been had the American Communists never existed, or in making believe none exist now while urging them to dissolve.” As for the Party, it is true that I doubt whether it can regenerate itself or the American Left and I believe something new must supersede it, which is different from demanding from the outside that it dissolve here and now, and unless it does, nobody else can do anything.

Aptheker asks for evidence to support such doubts. If the American people can be confidently expected to choose Socialism over capitalism, why can’t a few thousand Communists change their own party, he asks, as though this were a perfect syllogism. Perhaps the problem of the American people as a whole can be resolved, whereas a particular political formation has, by now, insoluble problems?

Max Weiss considers that the built-in principles of the Party distinguish it from any forerunner and make self-correction inevitable. This does not exactly explain why Max Weiss has had such difficulties over ten years in applying such principles to achieve the Party’s correction. To Weiss, the Draft Resolution is a “most incisive refuta-

tion" of my doubts. A strange word—"incisive" for such a document, even granting that it charts a forward course which it hesitates to pursue.

John Gates recognizes that neither my views nor actions are personal; they represent a challenge that comes to the Party from many quarters, including present members. He disagrees with me sharply, but presents a program which he thinks will make possible peaceful competition among Socialists.

I do not call upon the Party to dissolve, and never have. Nobody is keeping Weiss or Aptheker from applying their principles. If they resent the suggestion of their political impotence (about which many others have had a more anguishing experience than I) it is up to them to provide a potent rebuttal. I will not be the last to acknowledge that, if and when it comes.

Consider a report of the New York state organizational director in *Party Voice*, July 1956. This document says that "over the last ten years we have lost more than two-thirds of our membership." The report then says "of our present membership one-third are industrial workers." Of the total, no more than 20-30 percent are engaged in sustained activities", and "no more than 30-40 per cent attend meetings even on an irregular basis." Moreover, "two-thirds of our present membership is over 40 years old, with no recruiting taking place."

What do such figures mean, remembering they speak of last July, and granting that the situation may be different say, in California. These figures mean that the specific gravity of all those Party members who are not really connected with productive processes,

or even community activities, has risen sharply. Behind the statistics are human beings we have all known. They are fine, able people, with bright memories and deep loyalties. But do they constitute the kind of party they themselves desire? Can they regenerate the American Left? It may be more true that resistance to change in ideas and methods comes most strongly from them. And since they comprise a larger sector of a smaller group, their weight is felt more heavily in opposition to anything except what they have known.

As for the several thousand Party members who are in shops and community activities, I know many of them, have enjoyed the hospitality of their homes and tried to serve them. They do a job that no one can sneer at, and the Party has given them a certain cohesion and guidance. But what is their chief characteristic? Let it be put frankly: while many are known as Left-wingers, for the most part they function in political anonymity, and they do not take responsibility as Communists. They can't.

It is not a matter of finding fault or allocating it. The historic dilemma of the American Communists has been that so many effective leaders and members could not take responsibility for the Party as such; it is here that so many problems of leadership and so much of the source of bureaucracy lies. Such people cannot dissolve what they have, and nobody should ask it of them. But if the Party can be re-made, do not these, of all people, have to welcome policies of change, and provide new personnel and a fresh outlook?

Max Weiss is aghast that I favor—in terms of the American Left as a whole—something different than the

kind of party the Communists have tried to be. He calls it a "Fabian society," and considers it a backward step. The Communists, he is sure, will not break down doors to join it, and "it is difficult to believe that this is offered seriously as an instrumentality for generating a Socialist revival."

I am proposing nothing for which there is no real need or prospect. Many Socialist-minded people feel that a period of "dis-unification" on the Left, of a freedom from any organizational forms enables them to re-think and re-study best. I respect this feeling and know how it comes about. It is not in my thinking that a "Fabian society" would itself be the organization to lead Americans through the difficult transitions of Socialism at some future time, nor that it would be *the* organization on the Left. Perhaps its function would be no more than to organize the necessary discussion on the Left.

But it would be, in the light of cold realities about the Communist Party as well as the present moment in national life, a step forward. For whom? For those who no longer can function by the forms and ideas they had previously accepted. For at least a part of the three quarters of a million Americans who came into and left the Communist Party over 25 years, for at least part of the several millions who were ready to vote the Wallace ticket in 1948—yes, for those younger people, north and south, east and west,

Negro and white workers and non-workers who have questions about present-day America which go unanswered.

It is not for any single individual or group to form such a movement, just as I do not think it can come from the ex-Trotskyites or the Communists. Nobody can re-make the past, even if he wants to do better, nor can any group inherit the capital organization. Such a movement needs to be educational within itself and beyond itself, which is in no sense to weaken the activities that are going on all around us through established organizations. Such a movement needs democratic debate, re-study, honest argument, and I think it cannot have more than a sympathetic detachment towards Socialist and Communist forces abroad. It will come as people listen to each other, and more than that—hear each other. The basis for it exists in groups that are functioning throughout the country. The disdain which Max Weiss shows for such a proposal, or at most a grudging tolerance, may be a measure of his grasp of reality, but also an advantage to such a movement.

When it comes, it will supersede for most of us what we have known, without prejudicing the future. It may only be a halfway house. And many who do not see the need for it today may tomorrow ask—and find—a welcome in it.