

A Dilemma for All Sections of the Communist Party

Democracy and the Shake-up in Russia

By H. W. BENSON

Less than six months ago, the national convention of the Communist Party ended in New York. It was an event of genuine political significance affecting the course of radicalism in the United States. It came as the climax of a deep-going discussion inside the Communist movement lasting for at least a year: serious-minded party members and leaders sought a way out of the crisis into which their movement had been plunged by the revelations of the 20th Congress and the Hungarian Revolution. The best among them were turning away from totalitarian distortions of socialism and

toward the American working class movement and democratic socialism. It was a real discussion, an authentic internal struggle between divergent basic views. Anyone who still does not understand this can hardly comprehend what has aroused the socialist movement in this country.

The convention rebuffed the drive of William Z. Foster to re-Stalinize the American party, an attempt backed by the authority of Jacques Duclos whose new letter of advice was spurned. But at the same time, the convention evaded the main issues in the name of party unity: it did not even consider the Gates proposal for a Political Action Association; it dodged the Hungarian events; it failed to solidarize itself with the struggle of the Polish people, under the leadership of the Gomulka regime, for independence from Russian domination. Thus, its

sessions ended with a question mark.

Hundreds streamed out of the party in disappointment over its failure to make a real turn, the tendency which leaned toward democratic socialism. Many of them, finished with the Communist Party, now await the rebirth of a militant socialist movement.

Others, who were just as dissatisfied, decided to remain in the party, await new events, and renew the campaign for a turn toward socialist democracy under more favorable circumstances. Now, six months after, it is possible to take stock. Has the party moved further toward democratic socialism or has it begun to slide back toward Stalinism?

The most sensational event in the Communist world since the convention was the shift in Russia which entrenched the power of Khrushchev and eliminated two of the erstwhile highest ranking leaders: Malenkov and Molotov. The state of the American Communist Party is revealed instantaneously in this: before the last convention, a wide-ranging discussion, debates, articles, bulletins, an effort to grapple with basic socialist problems. Now, after the Russian events, almost nothing. An editorial in the *Daily Work-*

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Attention Newsstand Readers!

As everyone knows, in the past few years the cost of living has more than doubled. Reluctantly, one newspaper after another, regardless of its size, politics or quality, has been forced to increase its sales price. LABOR ACTION has resisted this trend longer than most, but we can do so no longer. As we announced in our last issue, the subscription price per year will remain the same despite our bi-weekly appearance. We now announce that starting with this issue, the price per individual copy will be ten cents.

Democracy and the Shake-up in Russia

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er, a short column by Joe Clark, and that is all.

To renew the discussion is not as simple as it appears. Not the least difficulty is a general weakening of the Gates forces and the resurgence of Foster and his co-thinkers. This is not to say that the Fosterites have been recruiting adherents. They have been winning only by default. As the party fails to move forward, it automatically slips backward. Even before the national convention, the Gates wing was weakened by defections, not to Foster, but out of the party in despair. The process continues. At the last state convention in New York, once a stronghold of anti-Stalinism, the Fosterites and allies took control. The Gatesites were voting with their feet. Pro-Gates delegates, elected before the convention, quit the party before it could assemble. The Fosterites could take over only because their rivals were disintegrating by the minute. Why? Those who left the party obviously saw no future with it. They were not guided in any fight for democratic socialism inside the party; they saw no alternative acceptable to them on the outside. So far, this situation remains unchanged.

FOSTERITES GAIN

The *Daily Worker* remains under the editorship of John Gates and therefore does not seem to reflect openly the changing balance of forces. We get a hint of the real situation only by realizing what the *Daily Worker* does not say.

Foster-types begin to take over in New York. The tone of old-time Stalinism is heard again in somewhat subdued fashion. In his resignation from the Communist Party, Howard Fast expressed horror at Stalin's crimes and criticized the Russian regime for maintaining dictatorship and continuing to suppress democracy. He called for freedom in Russia. One can understand why those who remain in the party criticize, even repudiate Fast's act of resignation and dissociate themselves from it. After all, they believe that Communists must reform the party, if possible. But what of Fast's call for democracy? What of his criticism of the Russian regime? That is something quite different. Is it permissible to agree with Fast on democracy and remain inside the party nevertheless?

The arrogance of Stalinistic thinking begins to reassert itself. Foster feels free in public to denounce Fast for his views on democracy, borrowing again from the old lexicon: "slander," "monstrous distortion," "playing directly into the hands of the class enemy."

Another sign of the times: *Political Affairs*, the party's monthly magazine, has a new editor: Herbert Aptheker. That alone tells all. Only at the very height of the party discussion did a trace of fresh air filter into its pages. But now! Aptheker is a typical "red professor" whose eminence in the party rests upon the art of sifting out little grains of history into a formless heap and building the latest line on top of it. This craft is displayed in classically crude form in his book "The Truth [sic!] About Hungary." Here, to the astonishment of no one, he discovers that all Hungarian history points to the irresistible conclusion that the Hungarian Revolution was essentially the result of a reactionary and imperialist plot, a conclusion that he had no doubt reached long before commencing his concentrated researches. As a reward, he now assumes the editorship of the party's magazine. Properly enough, the first issue under his editorship publishes a lengthy laudatory review of his own

book written by a member of the party's National Committee, Hal Lumer. Some time before, in the *Daily Worker*, a Gatesite reviewing the same book felt impelled to express his dissatisfaction with it!

With this background the party learned of the change in Russia. At first the *Daily Worker* was non-committal, confining itself to straight news. There was no return to the old Stalinist-style drum beating. It referred carefully to the "alleged" anti-party faction of Malenkov and Molotov, indicating very subtly that the editor did not necessarily swallow Moscow's official, canned account of events. That was all for a few days. Obviously, the *Daily Worker* which had quickly reflected dissatisfaction with Russian policy during the Hungarian events now felt it advisable to be prudent, perhaps to wait for top level party discussions. For this is a time of rising Fosterite strength and dwindling Gatesite influence.

A DILEMMA

Moreover, the Gatesites faced a dilemma entirely apart from the internal party balance. A Fosterite could react with automatic precision; to him each tack and turn in Russia is invariably the latest and greatest contribution to humanity; and now, when our own ruling politicians seemed pleased by events, he could ride with popular currents. But for the best of the Gatesites that will not do at all. They want a movement based not on Russian policy but on the needs of socialism in the United States. The turn in Russia took place under the sign of "liberalism," of "peaceful coexistence," of easing tensions in the Russian bloc. The Gatesites are all for that. Yet, the change was hardly a model of democracy. To climb the Khrushchev bandwagon was not good enough; it would suggest the old platform of blind apologetics. Thus, the *Daily Worker* continued to report developments in Russia in minor key, concentrating as usual on events in the United States which are simpler to handle.

On July 9, the *Daily Worker* commented editorially under the heading "Soviet Events and Coexistence." Later a reader wrote to the editor, "The *Worker* editorial on the change in leadership was an excellent piece of writing. One could almost picture the staff working together to present a correct editorial policy." In a way, he was right. It was an attempt to please everyone and in the end will probably prove fruitless. At bottom, the editorial approved of the changes. "Whatever their many secondary elements," it began, "the central feature of the recent historic Soviet events is that they strengthen the tide to peaceful coexistence and a durable peace." It approved of "the rebuffing of a faction" which opposed among other things "democratic rights of the Soviet people." And, "we view with the warmest sympathy the efforts of the Soviet Communists to maintain the unity of the party which leads 200 million Soviet peoples." If they are for unity, what of democracy?

DEMOCRACY?

"From all accounts," the editorial continues, "the issues were debated vigorously for a week at a full meeting of the Central Committee (about 200 were present) with all points of view presented. This was a departure from certain of the condemned practices of the latter years of the Stalin leadership which frequently bypassed the CPSU's elected bodies. The meeting took the decisive steps already noted. It may be suggested, however, that matters might not have even come to this pass had a wide public discussion preceded the meeting for the Soviet Communist Party membership and the Soviet people undoubtedly support wholeheartedly the policies of peaceful coexistence, democratization and the raising of living standards. The process of democratization requires such a debate; the process of correction of the abuses of Soviet democracy will undoubtedly provide new forms for such public discussion. But this is distinctly subordinate to the historic events themselves—events which will help shape a peaceful world."

It is impossible to consider this assemblage of ideas as a public declaration of policy; it reads like a diplomatic com-

munique, composed to satisfy an inner family circle. Is there a real trend to democracy in Russia? The editorial suggests that there is. But it offers not a single substantial fact to bolster its hope. If the "process of democratization requires public debate," was there any evidence of it in Russia? No, that is what is missing, we are told.

At any event this must be answered: yesterday Molotov, Malenkov and others were at the very pinnacle of power. In the twinkling of an eye, without public debate, and now without recourse of any kind, without the slightest right to go before the Russian people, they are immediately reduced to nothing... unanimously. If that is the fate of yesterday's rulers when they take issue with the regime, rightly or wrongly, what must be the fate of the ordinary Russian worker and farmer, without power or influence, who wants to call for a change? The Russian people want democracy? We have no reason to doubt it. But is the regime moving toward democracy? The dumping of Molotov and Malenkov without consultation with the people proves the opposite.

PUBLIC DEBATE?

On July 10, Joseph Clark was ready to go further in his *Daily* column. He spoke bluntly of "The lack of basic democratic procedure in the Soviet Communist Party which still persists..." (We remind our readers that it is the only legal party in the country! If there is no democracy within that party, how is it possible to speak at all of democracy in Russian society?) Clark deplores the fact that the removed Russian leaders "were never given the benefit of public debate. The struggle was bottled up in the presidium of the Party's Central Committee."

Clark then turns to the charge that they were responsible for Stalin's crimes and points out the plain truth. "It would be... fatuous to think that Khrushchev, Mikoyan, Bulganin and Voroshilov, remaining collaborators of Stalin, were also not responsible for the Leningrad frame-up and the repressions of the '30s for which they now blame Molotov, Malenkov and Kaganovich."

And so, there is no democracy in the Russian party; there was no appeal to the people possible for the defeated "faction"; the present leaders of Russia bear responsibility for Stalin's crimes. Any ordinary person would consider these to be grave charges. If true, they must lead to a basic change in attitude toward the ruling regime.

What is so astounding in this type of thinking is the ability to combine it with a whole system of old illusions. At the same time, Clark somehow senses a fight, among other things, over "democratization." "It would be unfortunate if that basic trend were obscured by the methods being used by the Soviet leaders to fight against Stalinism." And again, he concludes: "Meanwhile, slowly but inexorably by zig-zags if not straight, by fits and starts if not steadily, Soviet society moves toward democratization which is the guarantee of socialist progress."

ABOVE OR BELOW

But Clark will not face up to the issue. Let us assume that "Soviet society" will move toward democracy... and every socialist has confidence that it will because he has confidence in the Russian people.... The question is: will democracy be won by the people fighting below or will it be condescendingly handed down bit by bit by benevolent dictators above?

No realistic political person, and especially no socialist, can be satisfied merely with promises and hints of promises by rulers, especially when the latter enjoy uncontrolled tyrannical power. If Clark and his friends simply accepted the promises of the Russian regime as good coin we could only say that they are being deceived. But that is not the case! They are not even given promises! The Russian regime does not promise to move toward democracy (they only insist that they already have perfect "democracy"). They do not pledge to allow public debates. They do not offer public pledges of "democratization" to say nothing of free elec-

tions, free parties and free trade unions. Not at all. Clark and the *Daily Worker* are gratuitously reading these promises into events. They are only deceiving and disorienting themselves. And that is the tragedy: for it cuts them off from what is possible today: to rebuild a socialist movement in America and bring it to the working class.

The crucial fact, says the *Daily Worker*, is that the turn in Russia makes possible a peaceful world. All the questions of democratization, it maintains, are "distinctly subordinate to the historic events themselves, events which will help shape a peaceful world."

WHERE DO YOU STAND?

Suppose we grant that contention? Let us assume that the main impact of events in Russia is to strengthen the possibility of peaceful coexistence. But that alone will solve nothing for the Communist Party in the United States. The days when it could draft along on the tide of Russian policy are obviously gone. What socialist militants in the labor movement and the world of radicalism want to know from the Communist Party is this: where do you stand on democracy, not only in the United States but in Russia too? Do the latest events in Russia show a real turn of the regime to democracy? Does socialist democracy live in the private world of a narrow clique? It is not enough to piece together a reply that will hold divergent groups together inside the party, you must face the world of socialist public opinion.

Two years ago, the article by Clark and the *Worker* editorial would have represented a courageous break from the domination of the Russian CP. Even today, they reveal a strong resistance to the Fosterite process of re-Stalinization. But a lot has happened in the last year. Socialism in the United States faces a new beginning. All those, and they only, can make a real contribution toward its resurgence who publicly proclaim that socialism is and can only be democratic. It is not simply a question of abstract theory; it is a matter of finding a place inside a renewed socialist movement for every militant who should be there.

Liberals — —

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5. Trachtenberg further pointed out that the Liberal Party will win adherents to itself on the basis of its liberal program, and its independence from the Democratic Party. He ended with the proposal that someone like Charles Abram would make a far more suitable candidate for Mayor than the present Democratic incumbent.

The three delegates who spoke next rose to support the essence of Trachtenberg's remarks. One delegate from Brooklyn pointed out that the present city administration is without morality and that the Liberal Party would be gambling its principles and existence by supporting the Democratic Party. Another indicated a strong feeling for "running our own candidates."

Alex Rose then took the floor to supply the justification of the Policy Committee's proposal. This was based on the philosophy that the Liberal Party considers itself to be in a "coalition" with the Democratic Party and that the present municipal election campaign must be seen in light of this coalition and not as a separate entity in itself. He pointed out that the Liberal Party policy today has to be based on the 1958 elections when on a national scale, he felt that liberals and the labor movement would have to "coalesce" with the Democratic Party in order to defeat the Republicans.

In closing, Rose pointed out that "he had nothing against the members who spoke against" the Policy Committee's proposal, that he knew that they spoke "from motives of idealism and devotion" and that he wanted them to "stay and work along with us."

The vote was then taken on the Policy Committee's proposal. It was carried by a vote of 208, with 23 votes opposed.

WHAT'S GOING ON?

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