

Bulletin | Supplement

ON THE ROAD TO REVOLUTION IN THE UNITED STATES

Progressive Labor and the Origins of Revisionism

In the American Communist Movement

The building of a new revolutionary movement in the United States requires, first of all, an understanding of the causes of the failure of the old revolutionary movements. Without such an understanding a new movement must of necessity repeat the mistakes which led to the downfall of the old movements, and we will be not one whit closer to ending capitalism here and throughout the world.

The supporters of the American Committee for the Fourth International learned this lesson the hard way in the course of a long struggle against the degeneration of the Socialist Workers Party and major portions of the world Trotskyist movement. We were forced in the course of struggling against the revisionism which grew inside the Trotskyist movement to study the whole history of the movement back to its origins. Soon we will be publishing this study of ours.

Progressive Labor has taken a similar course following its own struggle against the revisionism of the American Communist Party. Its recently published pamphlet "Road to Revolution" is in large part an exploration of the origins of revisionism within the American Communist Party. The fact that the PLM has undertaken such a task distinguishes it from a number of other left breakaways from the Communist Party which in one fashion or another continue in their own way aspects of the revisionism of the organization from which they broke organizationally.

For example, the POC group (Provisional Organizing Committee for a Marxist-Leninist Party) broke away from the CP a few years ago with a large number of workers. This group however has degenerated into an ultra-Stalinist sect deeply removed from the masses and but a small fraction of its original size. The Labor-Negro Vanguard group broke away from the CP more recently and has made a number of telling criticisms of the lack of militancy in the CP. But not getting at the roots of the revisionism which has destroyed the CP, they continue the CP's rotten policy of working within the capitalist Democratic Party.

Progressive Labor, having looked deeper into the past of the American Communist Party, is thus better qualified today to build a movement and has actually had better

success in doing so. To say that PL has started on this important task does not mean that it has really carried out this task to completion. It must dig deeper and deeper into the origins of revisionism until it has a completely rounded and non-contradictory understanding. Until it has completed this historical task, it cannot help but continue to be plagued today and in the future with problems of revisionism. Those who turn their backs on this work, saying we should "forget the past", will themselves constantly bring up the past by repeating the errors of the past.

Back to the Earliest Days

It is Progressive Labor's position that the roots of revisionism in the CP go far back. It states: "From the earliest days of the communist movement in the United States to the present, revisionism and its political manifestation, class collaboration, has been the chronic weakness." This revisionism PL finds expressed in the notion of American Exceptionalism -- that the United States is different from other countries and free from the kind of class contradictions and capitalist crises that plague other capitalist countries. It identifies revisionism with Lovestone, Browder, Gates, and to a lesser extent William Z. Foster. The latter is seen as partially resisting revisionism but going along with it nonetheless for a whole period of the party's development.

The problem is that Progressive Labor makes no attempt to relate the development of revisionism within the American party to the evolution of the Communist International and the Russian leadership. It is precisely PL's failure to relate developments inside the CPUSA with the evolution of the International which not only weakens PL's analysis of the evolution of the CPUSA, but leads it into some extremely deep contradictions. Thus chapter ten, "The Development of Revisionism in the International Movement" and chapter five, "The Origins and Results of Class Collaboration in the United States", bear no real relationship to each other.

Was Stalin a 'Militant Revolutionary'?

This is particularly clear when we get to the question of the role of Stalin: "While one can point to errors of Stalin and the Soviet leadership in this period it is generally recognized that there existed a militant revolutionary line." PL is here discussing the period of the 1930s and early 40s -- precisely the period when the CPUSA was putting forward its deeply class collaborationist line under the leadership of Earl Browder! Of course, PL is not uncritical of Stalin. It sees Stalin's lack of democratic rule and bureaucratism. However, this is to PL on the minus side, to be balanced by Stalin's supposed greater militancy and revolutionary line internationally.

This is how PL characterizes the CPUSA during these years when Stalin is seen as a militant revolutionist:

After the expulsion of Lovestone, the Party developed a militant pragmatic approach which appealed to workers during the Depression and produced a mass base for the CP. But even at that time there was no longer range revolutionary strategy developed which could sustain the Party when objective conditions of the depression changed. ... On balance, despite thousands of devoted revolutionary-minded members, the CP was a party of reform, not revolution. ... On the course of winning concessions, and with the advent of World War II, the CP developed an uncritical, non-class attitude to the Roosevelt administration ... Browder's famous Bridgeport speech on the agreements reached at Teheran put the CPUSA in complete unity with the U.S. ruling class.

The question literally jumps at one: How is it that the CPUSA evolved as a revisionist, reformist, class collaborationist party for over twenty years while it was collaborating on the closest terms with Stalin, whom PL sees as a militant revolutionary, without Stalin and the other leaders of the Comintern taking some action to rectify this revisionism? The truth is that the line of the CPUSA was Stalin's like, created by Stalin and imposed by him upon the CP first through Lovestone, then Browder, and then Foster. There is no other rational explanation for the facts.

A Look at the History

Let us briefly recapitulate the history of the CPUSA as it related to Stalin and the Comintern. The American Communist Party of the early 1920s was a very weak formation with many contradictory elements within it and without a developed and experienced leadership trained in Marxist theory. Its major constituents were the foreign born language federations who had little contact with the mainstream of American life and who in many ways played a conservative and inward oriented role within the CP, and the native born workers and revolutionists like William Z. Foster and James P. Cannon who had a good feel for the working class but were highly empirical and had almost a hostility to Marxist theory. In the early days with the help and advice of Lenin, Trotsky and others, the American CP began to develop a serious relationship to the working class in this country and at least begin to grapple with the problems it faced.

After 1925 a new element entered into the development of the CPUSA -- the factional struggles within the Russian party and their consequences. In 1925, the Foster-

Cannon forces within the CP had a clear majority of the party behind them. However the Comintern intervened in such a way as to prevent Foster and Cannon from assuming leadership. Leadership instead went, in time, to Lovestone. It was in fact Stalin, then in a bloc with Bukharin, who put Lovestone into power inside the American CP and who supported Lovestone's line of American exceptionalism. In 1927-29 Stalin started to break with Bukharin and as a result of this Lovestone was dumped in the American party.

Normally it would have^{been} assumed that Foster would take his place, especially since Cannon had supported Trotsky and had been expelled from the party. But this did not take place. In the earlier period Foster, even more than Cannon, had resisted the Comintern and Stalin when their policies conflicted with his own understanding of the American working class. Because of this Foster was not considered reliable by Stalin. Instead Foster's assistant Browder was put in charge and so remained until the end of the war.

Browderism Was Not an American Exception

Browder's role in the CP is aptly described by PL. For our purposes here it is only enough to stress that at every point Browder was faithfully carrying out Stalin's policy and in no essential way was his work different from that of the CPs of other countries. Thus while PL noted that the American CP supported Roosevelt and rallied the working class around this representative of the capitalist class, aiding him in preventing the working class from striking out on its own, it does not note that the European parties acted in the same way in their own countries. The French Communist Party entered a Popular Front Government not only with the Socialist Party but also with the bourgeois Radical party. This coalition with the bourgeoisie failed to offer any aid to the Spanish Republic at the time of Nazi and Italian support for Franco.

During the war when Browder reached out his hand to J. Pierpont Morgan and followed up this gesture by dissolving the CP as a formal party, he was only doing in the U.S. what others in the Comintern were doing in their respective countries. The Italian Communists went so far as to favor the continuation of the monarchy in Italy, only having to reverse themselves when the overwhelming sentiments of the masses made such a deal impossible. It was Stalin directly who acted to dissolve the Comintern itself as a formal organization in the war period as a gesture of friendliness to Churchill, FDR and the capitalist interests they represented.

When the war was over, the imperialists again turned on the Soviet Union and as a result certain tactical changes were necessarily imposed upon Stalin. But Stalin in no sense reverted to any class struggle or "militant

revolutionary" line. While the American CP under Foster set about to run the capitalist, Henry Wallace, on a capitalist program, in France the CP was in the same government with DeGaulle, in Italy the CP was in a common bourgeois government with the Christian Democrats, in Greece the Communist-led partisans allowed the British to reconquer the country and turn it over to the reactionaries, in Indochina the Vietminh did the same with the French.

Clearly the degeneration of the CPUSA was closely related to a similar process affecting all Communist parties in the world. This process itself was obviously a reflection of internal developments within the USSR itself. The first step to achieving an understanding of the degeneration of American communism is to see it as part of an international process. To do otherwise is in itself a certain sign of giving in to "American exceptionalism."

In our next article we will seek to dig to the roots of this revisionism in the internal evolution of the USSR and also to study the reasons for the relatively feeble resistance within the American party to this revisionism, in particular as this relates to the healthiest strain within the early CP represented by Cannon and Foster.

THE MILITANT AND THE SENATOR FROM OREGON

It has become increasingly the practice of the Socialist Workers Party to fill out the pages of its organ the Militant with the speeches of "heroes" of the moment. First it was Fidel Castro, then Ben Bella, then Malcolm X, and now--the Honorable Senator from Oregon, Wayne Morse.

Of course, it is also the tradition of the Militant to express its criticisms from time to time of those whose speeches it prints. This being such an occasion (as the Militant is not yet used to printing the speeches of members of the ruling capitalist party in the U.S.), the Militant takes the liberal senator to task for--not understanding the nature of the United Nations!

But it is far more than the Honorable Senator's views of the UN that are at fault. It is his entire approach. The Senator views Vietnam from the perspective of a member of the ruling party of the ruling class of the ruling imperialist power in the world. His differences with fellow party member Johnson are over how best to maintain imperialist rule in Vietnam and elsewhere. The Senator wisely feels this can be done through some sort of neutralization of Vietnam rather than continuing an unsuccessful military campaign. (Would he feel the same way if it were successful? We would!)

Perhaps next week's edition of the Militant will print the Honorable Senator's recent fulminations on how the U.S. should not send surplus food to Egypt?