

The Birth of the American Communist Movement

In the Series: Ten Years of Communism in America and the Future

By Jay Lovestone

OUR Party is now ten years young. Historically, ten years is a very short time, yet at the end of the first decade it is in place to look both backward and forward—to consider both our history and our future.

Revolutionary traditions play a very prominent part in building a Communist Party, in developing a revolutionary proletarian ideology. But we must not engage in reminiscences for the sake of glorifying the past. We must examine the mistakes and achievements of yesterday with the aim of learning how to make less mistakes and how to win more achievements today and tomorrow. Our examination of the Party's experiences and our analysis of its problems must be free from lingering illusions and prejudices and must be entirely objective in the best Leninist sense of the word.

The first serious manifestation of a left wing in the American socialist movement came as a result of two forces. The Russian Revolution of 1905 was a breath of fresh air, a revolutionary breeze thruout the Second International, already becoming degenerate with parliamentary cretinism. Thruout the Socialist world could be felt a surging wave of "direct actionism," of anti-parliamentarism—healthy in its roots tho false in its syndicalist reaction. Secondly, in the United States, this period marked the beginning of an accelerated trustification, of a break-down of small scale production of the growth of large scale corporate manufacturing. This structural change in industry naturally brought vigorous reaction on the part of the masses in the form of violent struggles against the monopolists. It was these conditions that gave birth to the giant trusts, to the I.W.W., and to the Roosevelt trust-busting "progressivism."

In these two significant objective factors is to be found the basis for the rise of the left-wing movement in the Socialist Party. Many will recall the expulsion of Haywood, the mass expulsions of the left-wing workers, the struggle over Article II, Section 6; the fight over legalism, sabotage and crass constitutionalism at the 1912 Convention which ended in a victory for the "yellows."

The Socialist Party now rushed precipitately into opportunism and reformism. Flushed with the municipal election victory in Milwaukee, the Hillquit-Berger statisticians began to figure out when they would "take over" the government on a local, state and national scale. Even the weak and confused fight against the Gompers bureaucracy was at first sabotaged and then gradually dropped.

The outbreak of the World War deepened the already fundamental differentiations within the S.P. On the Right stood the open social-chauvinists (Spargo, Russel, Walling, Stokes, etc.) who were pro-Ally. In the miserable Center stood the somewhat camouflaged tho no less dangerously social-patriotic Berger-Hillquit group who were either open or disguised pro-Germans. The leader of the Left was *Comrade Ruthenberg*.

Soon came Zimmerwald and Kienthal. The signs of a revival of internationalism in the ranks of the proletariat were multiplying. The mainspring of this revolutionary revival was of course international opposition to the imperialist war and keen disappointment as well as growing disillusionment with the traitorous role of the official Social-democratic leaders.

In the American Socialist movement this first revolutionary awakening in years crystallized itself in the organization of the *Socialist Propaganda League*. We soon began the publication of the *New International*. This group really laid the foundation

for the development of the Communist movement. It was the first near-Bolshevik crystallization in the United States. Bukharin, Melnichansky, Rutgers and other comrades participated in this organization. It was the Socialist Propaganda League which introduced the writings of Lenin in the United States.

With the entry of the U. S. A. into the World War the struggle of the Left Wing reached a new stage. The victory of the proletarian revolution in Russia, which followed soon after, the revolutionary sweep in Germany, the Soviets in Bavaria and Hungary, the open betrayal of the Socialist leaders at home, their capitulation to crass social-chauvinism, their cowardly attitude towards the persecuted I.W.W. who were showing their last signs of revolutionary vigor in militant strike activity against the war—all of these factors made for considerable strengthening of the left-wing forces in the Socialist Party.

Local Boston of the S.P. soon began publication of the *Revolutionary Age*. In Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago and especially New York, the Left made great headway. I recall a stormy session in the Socialist Party City Central Committee of New York in November 1918 when the Left Wing forces had already developed so much strength as to paralyze the Right Wing (Hillquit, Gerber, Trachtenberg, etc.) and adopt (without expressed opposition) a flaming resolution greeting the Workers and Soldiers Council in Berlin.

Such was the spirit animating growing sections of the American working class. Events now moved fast. By February 1919, the first Communist Program in the U.S.A. was adopted by the *New York Left Wing Conference*. Among the members of the Executive Committee elected at this Conference were *Ben Gitlow, Bert Wolfe, Jim Larkin, Jack Reed, and Jay Lovestone*. This committee, together with the leading forces of the Boston Left Wing constituted itself as a sort of provisional center of the national Left Wing. In New York the weekly *Communist* began publication. Under the leadership of Comrade Ruthenberg, Local Cleveland, then the banner city organization in the S.P., soon went Left Wing. With this as an impetus the New York Left Wing Program was soon endorsed in the biggest city locals of the Socialist Party from coast to coast.

By June 1919, the Left Wing movement—the direct precursor of our Communist Party—took on such country-wide proportions that there was soon held a *National Conference* in New York which adopted a Left Wing Manifesto. This declaration became the program of the entire Left Wing. The National Council elected at this conference became the leading body of the Left Wing, publishing as its organ the *Revolutionary Age* (now merged with the *New York Communist*) in New York City. On the National Council were C. E. Ruthenberg, Ben Gitlow, Bert Wolfe and John Reed.

As in the Russian Bolshevik movement, so in the first stages of our Party, serious dissensions developed over questions of organization. A sharp factional struggle soon divided the Left Wing. The main issues were: the role of the Russian Socialist Federation which then sought to exercise not merely ideological hegemony but also organizational monopoly, and the tempo of the split from the Socialist Party. This division led to the formation of two Communist Parties in Chicago during September 1919. The *Communist Party of America* was led by Comrade Ruthenberg. The *Communist Labor Party of America* was under the leadership of Comrades Gitlow and Reed.