

The Need for a Critical 'New Look'

By JAMES S. ALLEN

IN MY FIRST comment on the 20th Congress (The Worker, March 4), based on incomplete reports, I gave an enthusiastically positive estimate of that historic gathering, with respect to prospects for new socialist advances and for world peace. Since then, having studied the major speeches and other materials of the Congress, and having considered the views expressed on all sides, my initial impression has been confirmed and strengthened.

To be sure, serious and weighty critical appraisals of past and current policies still have to be made, and important lessons from the costly mistakes of the past period still have to be learned.

But I see no reason for American Marxists, despite their own serious and costly mistakes, to assume the kind of defensive or apologetic positions which will only oblige the anti-Sovietees who are trying desperately to incite chaos and splits in the Marxist movement, while continuing their persecution of it. To succumb to such subjective moods merely leads to anarchism, makes confusion worse confounded, when what is needed is to arrive at some understanding of events.

I say this with a full appreciation of the shocks and problems created by what appear to be sudden turns of policy, which always take time to understand in their full implications. I say this also without any intention whatsoever to discourage the "soul-searching" referred to in last week's editorial in The Worker, or the open and critical discussion which has begun in these pages.

SUCH discussion was a necessity of the American Left long before the 20th Congress, arising from its critical condition and the need to formulate programs and policies that would facilitate a resurgence of the labor and people's progressive movement.

If it takes history-shaking events abroad to make people

think basically and critically about our own state of affairs and to speak their mind, that's good too, providing this is done constructively and with a sense of responsibility. The thaw in itself is welcome, after a long freeze-over, and it is good to see the first freshets of the early spring. But these freshets can turn into a destructive flood, unless they are given direction, unless they are turned to irrigating the parched but rich soil of our own Marxist and progressive movement.

The bubbling and the turmoil is stimulating, the questioning on all sides, the beginning of criticism. Every leader and movement should be subjected to it from time to time, to prevent stagnation and self-satisfaction; it should be welcomed as a normal and necessary way of life in Marxist and progressive circles. It is the best, the most effective method of mass political education. To get the full benefits of this process, the leaders have to participate fully; the responsibility of leadership is ever there.

The issues we face have to be placed for discussion in a clear and organized way. Eugene Dennis, General Secretary of the Communist Party, in his first speech since released from prison, delivered a month before the 20th Congress, recognized the need for a "new look" at and a reexamination of his party's policies. Such a self-critical review, aimed primarily at clarification and formulations of policy for the present period, will be welcomed by the entire Left.

There is a great impatience to turn to the vital problems faced by the Left, without getting lost in an endless discussion which has no fixed objective.

IN EMPHASIZING the need for a reexamination of program, policies and organization based on problems here, I do not mean to obscure the great lessons to be gathered from the inner Soviet development.

There is every reason for progressives to be elated over

current events in the Soviet Union. One era in the history of Soviet socialist society, the era associated with the name of Stalin, has come to an end, and a new era of advance has begun. This is a leap forward, and in making the leap the Soviet Union is getting rid of outmoded thinking and practices, and of harmful remnants from the preceding era.

The outstanding fact, overriding all difficulties of appraisal and explanation, is that the era of one-man rule with all its distortions is over, and that a further upsurge of socialism has begun, on the basis of past accomplishments and with a new impulse to inner Soviet democracy and to mass creative effort and enthusiasm.

In the midst of the most favorable world situation it has ever confronted, the Soviet Union is entering with full vigor upon peaceful competition with capitalism in all fields. It has broken the monopoly of nuclear weapons. It is now engaged on the more important task of breaking the monopoly of a high standard of living, as even an unfriendly commentator has had to acknowledge.

It has also set out to prove to the world that socialism, although it began from a backward economic and cultural base, can also outdo the most advanced capitalist countries in education and culture, and in regard for the human values—yes, the dignity of man and the rights of the individual. The Soviet Union has embarked on the extended road of this broad competition—at last, after decades of hardships, sufferings,

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sacrifices of all kinds, including the costly and heartbreaking mistakes of the pioneer along a lonely road.

These tasks have made necessary a sharp break with some of the approaches and methods of the Stalin era, which now become obstacles. In the current discussions here the tendency has been to place the question too narrowly, as involving only the estimate of one man, a judgment of Stalin's role in history. But to judge Stalin properly—his contributions as well as his mistakes, his attributes as well as his misdeeds—it is necessary to appraise also the role of other leaders, the impact of various events, the evaluation of theory and policy—and above all the place of this era in the development of socialism.