

The American Road to Socialism

A Special Section Devoted to Discussion of the Past and Perspectives of the Communist Party and the American Left

Edited by Discussion Committee,
Communist Party

Communists and the Fight for Civil Liberty

(Excerpts from remarks on civil liberties made to a meeting of the National Committee of the Communist Party on April 30, 1956, by S. W. Gerson, chairman of the party committee on civil liberties. The general line of the views expressed were endorsed by the committee meeting.)

By SIMON W. GERSON

WHILE THE STRUGGLE to ascend back to the Bill of Rights continues to have its ups-and-downs, the dominant curve is upward.

There is a mass of evidence confirming this—in the mass movement, the courts, etc. This is evident by the Matusow revelations and the winning of a retrial with its impact on the frameup system; the decision of the Supreme Court for the first time since the Dennis case to take a new look at the Smith Act (California and Pittsburgh appeals), the first jury acquittals in Smith Act cases (Cleveland, New Haven); the Supreme Court victory in the Steve Nelson state sedition case; a series of good decisions in respect to the Fifth Amendment (except, of course, for the Ullman decision); the Bridges victory, etc. etc.

This is also evident in the increased activity of non-Left forces. This was shown most clearly last December in the amnesty petition signed by Mrs. FDR and others.

Of the greatest significance is the growing demand in wide circles for a complete re-evaluation of the repressive legislation of the past period. This appears to be a commonly held position in leading circles of what we could call loosely the labor-liberal-Democratic forces of the nation.

INCREASINGLY, there is a growing understanding that a defense of the legal rights of the Communists is necessary to a defense of civil liberties generally. But this process is a highly uneven one.

What can be done to advance this process? What obstacles are there to be overcome?

Apart from the objective fact of governmental repression and reactionary pressures generally, a number of other factors still hold back the unfolding of wide struggle in defense of the rights of the Party. Some of these can be classified as ideological in character. To put them bluntly:

1. A widespread confusion on communism and democracy. There is a widespread belief, spread assiduously by reaction but accepted even by most liberals, that Communists are "totalitarians"—whatever that means precisely—and that Communists believe in civil liberties for themselves but, whenever they have power or opportunity, deny them to others, particularly political opponents.

2. Defeatism in the ranks of the Left. This is based on a deep underestimation of the democratic feelings of the masses, their understanding and deep attachment to popular democratic traditions.

3. A "theory" in the ranks of the Party that "defense activity is an obstacle to mass work."

LET US DEAL with these:

1. On the central question of the relationships between communism and democracy and bourgeois democratic rights in particular there is a solid body of theory and practice of which our Party can be

Statement of the Committee

Some weeks ago, this committee announced the opening of a public discussion on the report of Comrades Eugene Dennis, and Claude Lightfoot and Max Weiss to the National Committee of the CPUSA and urged the fullest participation of all Party members and organizations.

We print in this issue the second articles that have been received.

The discussion now being initiated is, of course, not entirely new. For some time now, there has been intense debate in the

ranks of the Party on all phases of our work. A profound process of re-examination is going on. There are differences of opinion within our ranks on a whole host of questions. There is nothing alarming about this. For only an open, frank and vigorous discussion in which every member honestly and frankly states his or her position, can guarantee that we will emerge with a stronger party and one more capable of truly serving and advancing the welfare of

the American people and the cause of Socialism.

We trust that this discussion will mark a new stage; in that it will help further deepen our understanding of the past, both in its positive and negative feature, as well as increasingly bring forth much more thinking with regard to future perspectives.

We urge upon everyone fullest participation in this discussion.

DISCUSSION COMMITTEE
COMMUNIST PARTY



SIMON GERSON

Probably the most serious error was one that occurred fifteen years ago with which we have been taxed since—our attitude, equivocal at best, on the Smith Act prosecution of the Trotskyite Dunne brothers who headed the Minneapolis Teamsters in 1941.

What were the roots of that error? First, it was obvious that we mechanically imported into our thinking the attitude of the Soviet Union towards the Trotskyites. There they were, in fact, an outlaw current moving outside and against the stream of Soviet life. In the U. S., however, they were a small anti-Soviet, anti-Communist, disruptive grouping—but in a number of places with associations inside the labor movement.

But beyond that, in my judgment, our mistake was of a more fundamental character. We, in fact, if not in theory, accepted the illusion that the Smith Act was "a two-sided instrument," i.e., it could be used at one time against reactionaries or against Trotskyites, etc., without necessarily being a danger to the Party and to the Left and progressive movement as a whole.

True, that the Trotskyites had a position against the anti-fascist war. True, that their position, if adopted, would have done great damage to the united war effort and the security of the people of the USA. But this wrong position of the Trotskyites should and could have been fought out within the ranks of the labor movement. As a matter of fact, their essential position was fought and overwhelmingly rejected in the course of the anti-Axis war.

Having made this original error we compounded it by ignoring the fight for the legless Trotskyite veteran, James Kutcher; in the 1949 Bill of Rights Conference, etc. The sad fact is that that error of 1941 has hindered our work up to the present and has been a factor in helping isolate us. It must be frankly stated and collectively repudiated.

THE FACT is that while we have used the slogan, "civil liberties are indivisible" in our defense, some people are suspicious of it as an allegedly "classless" slogan that collides with the class interests of the workers and is an impermissible one for the Left. Well-meaning comrades have been heard to argue, for example, "Does this mean that we must defend Joe

McCarthy's right to free speech?"

Such an argument, within the framework of the American democratic struggle, is an abstract one. The concrete historical fact is that the fight for civil liberties, for the Bill of Rights for all, is an issue that stems from the masses. It is not the Joe McCarthys or the Eastlands whose civil liberties are in danger; it is that of the worker on the picket line, the Negro people, the fighter for peace and social progress, the dissenter against the policies of reaction.

Fulfillment of the promise of the slogan, "civil liberties are indivisible," would mean winning precisely those rights in the marketplace of opinion necessary to defeat politically the Joe McCarthys and the Eastlands. Far from colliding with the class interests of the workers and the principled outlook of the Left, this slogan, however it may be construed by some civil libertarians is an indispensable basis for the widest unity of fighters for popular democratic rights.

Secondly, we must reject any defeatist concept in our work. It runs flatly contrary to our well-grounded estimate of the possibilities and it flies in the face of the realities of increasing, even if partial, victories, as in New York, Cleveland and New Haven, not to speak of the Nelson case.

Thirdly, we must reject the so-called theory that defense activity is an obstacle to mass work. The contrary has proven to be true. Whenever an energetic struggle was made on the basis of a united front policy defense activity has proven to be not an obstacle but a vehicle. Defendants who have left the ranks of the chair-borne infantry and knocked at doors have discovered that some hitherto shut ones have opened up. Experience has demonstrated that new allies were won not only for the immediate struggle but that new friends were made and new relationship were established—all helpful in the struggle to get back to the mainstream.

It is particularly necessary to stress this point if we are to carry through successfully the next stages of struggle around the Smith Act which is not only decisive in the fight for the legality of the Party but is the keystone of the whole evil edifice of repressive legislation and administrative actions.

Communist Party Standing at the Crossroads

By FRED FINE

(Continued from last week)

An analysis and re-examination of the past brings into focus certain interesting facts and indicates that we were a complex of things. Let us take 1932-1936. Programmatically we were out of this world—with books coming out in that period (long since repudiated by our Party) like *Towards a Soviet America* by William Z. Foster, *Olgin's Why Communism?*, etc. In terms of Party organizational policy we were a very strange animal for an American organization judging by a re-reading of J. Peter's *Manual of Organization*. Nevertheless, we were a Party leading hundreds of thousands and even millions in struggle.

But 1932 was also a year in which new factors had arisen which were beginning to open the minds of millions of Americans to new ideas, and we were an important factor in helping

these ideas come to fruit. We were concerned with what the workers were thinking and understood in part what they were ready to do, and we gave leadership within the possibilities and also the limitations of the moment. So that while we didn't draw conclusions programmatically, or even in terms of Party organization that we might have, we did help build mass organizations and lead mass struggles.

We might add parenthetically that there was no upsurge of mass socialist consciousness—though there were some signs of growing interest—and this only served to italicize how unrealistic and impractical was our programmatic presentation and organizational forms and explains in part why we did not make socialism a more acceptable current in the mass movements of the workers.

The 1930's were a coming-together of a whole host of factors—the breakdown of the economy,

the international situation, and our own ability, despite our history and deeply ingrained left sectarianism, to understand the partial and immediate approaches required to fuse with the moods and the needs of the masses, and some understanding of the level of the mass movement (which is always so important) that made our role so positive.

OBJECTIVE POSSIBILITIES ALONE NOT ENOUGH

If some of us are ready to wipe out our past with one fell swoop, let us at least not write off the new level of mass consciousness which we helped to bring into being, which struck deep roots and has become so embedded that even a Cadillac Cabinet has dealt with it with extreme caution. Shall we deduce from this that program, Party organization, style of work, are all meaningless—that given a different objective situation all our problems would be cured?

No, because in our history, especially our recent history, the ruling class has effectively exploited our programmatic and organizational monstrosities. Fed by our own left sectarianism and aided by our faulty analysis and tactics, they were able to brand us as un-American and alien to such a degree that even the objective situation changing will not solve these problems by themselves.

We formed a "Russian-type" Party which did not fit into the American scene completely, and though going through some metamorphosis in the past 25 years still doesn't meet traditions of the special requirements and customary forms of the American workers. We raised programmatic slogans that practically ignored our country's own history, our people's traditions. We often inhibited, frustrated and even treated with animosity

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Communist Party Standing at the Crossroads

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rudimentary and primitive native Socialist groupings and groupings.

Now let us take the years from 1946 on—a period which at best was destined to be rough sledding for progressive and Marxist forces in America (given the cold war years, the high level of employment, and the McCarthyite threat). We are of the opinion that given a correct line and correct policies—tactical and organizational—we could have blunted, and even circumvented some of the sharpest phases of the attacks upon us. What is more, we could have helped the nation as a whole more quickly to move onto new pathways towards peaceful co-existence and defense of constitutional and democratic rights.

THE WALLACE EXPERIENCE

To the extent that we took positions which in any important degree identified themselves with the moods of the masses, to that degree did we get a response. In the months of 1947 and 1948 when tens of thousands were responding to the Wallace rallies over the country, we were in growing harmony with the peace sentiments in the country, but this did not mean the people were ready for a break with the two-party system, especially given the demagoguery of the Truman campaign. And to the extent that we pressed these mistaken policies, to that extent did we feed the splits and ultimate isolation we suffered.

The same lesson in a sense holds true also for our opposition to the unpopular Korean war and our fight against McCarthyism and for our own civil liberties. We were in basic harmony with the aspirations of millions but our distorted analysis and tactics separated us.

The even more fundamental question has come forward whether this Party as we have known it over the past ten years, with the policies, line and form of organization with which we've

been operating, can end its isolation and become a major factor, both in the political realignment of the tens of millions as well as bringing about an important advance in socialist ideology and influence in the country.

Most of us have come to realize that fundamental changes are needed and simply doing more of what we have been in the past ten years is not the recipe for a drastic change for the better. But there is more than one view on what this means. Rather extensive discussion is taking place on the question of whether the Party is in crisis and if so, what is the cure.

I understand the word "crisis" to mean a very profound and crucial turning point in the life of an individual, organization or nation. The Party has been seriously isolated and weakened, has experienced sharp and continuous loss of membership and influence. There is, too, a shaken confidence within the ranks of the Party of its ability to find its way and solve its problems. These things are true and in this sense we are in a crisis. But I feel that we can emerge from this crisis because I do not believe that we have expended all our capital and are bankrupt. If we have the courage to throw out all that is bad and firmly and wisely hold on to what was good, we can help open a new and important phase in the development of the American Socialist movement.

PARTY AT CROSSROADS

I think it would be accurate to say that our Party, which has been seriously isolated and weakened in the past ten years, is at the most critical juncture in its development. The Party is at a crossroads which can lead to its becoming an impotent sect (as has happened to some would-be Marxist groupings—SLP, Proletarian Party, etc.) as over a new and partly unmapped road, towards a mass party of American Socialism, which at some stage

will require a coming-together of the healthiest current and groupings of socialist-minded Americans.

Perhaps it was unavoidable that the main reports and vote of the first National Committee meeting in five years (at which a majority were in attendance) could only accomplish what it did, that is, to bring together and make formal certain conclusions which the great bulk of the Party had been arriving at in its thinking for some time, and thus to give us all a common point of departure. Furthermore, some very important questions briefly raised in the report are being vigorously debated: peaceful transition, the Negro question—just to name two. But even here, the lead given has been tardy and weak as yet.

It would therefore seem that even before the first phase of the two-month extraordinary discussion inaugurated by the first National Committee meeting comes to an end, something new must be added. Questions of program, proposals and tactics and line, and draft recommendations an organizational policy and style of work must be presented by the leading committees for general but concentrated Party debate. Originally the thinking of the National Committee provided for this to be done in some form after Labor Day. Circumstances suggest that this is an unnecessary and perhaps harmful delay.

Without in any way limiting the frontiers of the discussion, clarity and forward movement will best be served if we face up one by one to a number of the more fundamental questions before us for concentrated debate. Otherwise a sort of guerilla warfare develops desultory fire in all directions while a certain aimlessness begins to seep into all of our discussions and activities. And many of our debates are over vague generalities and symbols.

On at least a number of spot-

lighted questions there can and should be a concentrated and intensive debate under the leadership of the National Committee that would begin to fill in some of the gaps in the freewheeling discussion, without in any way imposing restrictions on the frontiers of the wide range of questions being discussed. This could be done in part by the National Committee formulating some of the questions which it deems most crucial for resolution, publishing these questions and inviting comments specifically on such questions. Special editions of our discussion bulletins and in the Sunday Worker should be devoted to these particular questions in the form of symposiums.

These might include:

1. The whole gamut of questions related to peaceful and constitutional transition; the scientific validity of the concept of peaceful democratic and constitutional transition for our country, and also the relationship of this programmatic concept to the Socialist regrouping in the USA.

2. Is our Party in a crisis? Short of and leading to a regrouping of Socialist-minded Americans, what decisions on organizational policy can the CPUSA take at its Convention which will make of itself, for the present and in the meantime, a Socialist party which most closely conforms to the needs and traditions of the American working class?

3. What are the tasks of American Marxists within the American labor movement in order to achieve a greater unity, militancy and political consciousness among the tens of millions of American workers at their present level, and which will also stimulate and make legitimate Socialist currents in the American labor movement?

4. The Negro question in all of its ramifications. (The next National Committee meeting plans to project this question for wide Party discussion. This will help meet the problem posed in

this article. This will be further supplemented by an important conference on the South, sponsored by the Jefferson School at the end of this month, in which many Party leaders will participate.)

5. What are the chief characteristics of the slowly emerging anti-monopoly coalition? Is there not something significantly new in the trends towards mergers in the ranks of finance capital, in their growing grip on the economy and government of the nation, in the many new skirmishes of the people against monopoly encroachments? How does this fuse and stand on the shoulders of the long history of the popular struggle in this country against the trusts and the monopolies? What role will the dominant monopolies play with respect to a perspective of peaceful and competitive co-existence? What is new and different as between the coalition of the '30s, the coalition during the war years and the coalition we seek now?

6. What is our attitude towards Social Democracy and various labor reformist groupings?

7. Does greater independence as a Marxist Party have specific implications for our Party's tactics in the fight for peace and in the area of foreign policy?

END DOGMATISM

There are other questions equally important but it is not our intention to canvass them all. The point is that the test of whether we can meet the challenge at this critical turning point depends in large part on whether we can put an end to dogmatism, imitativism, and left sectarianism in terms of answers to questions like these.

Correct answers to these questions will help speed the day of the coming together of all Socialist-minded workers and groupings in our country. Otherwise it becomes idle speculation that will make the concept of socialist regrouping a tired and disappointing cliché, while we ourselves will be fragmented.

I for one am confident that the current discussion and our Convention will bring us a long step closer to our goal.

Does the Communist Party Play a Vanguard Role?

By DAVID ENGLESTEIN

A MAJOR, if not the central, theme of the discussion on Eugene Dennis' report may well be the topic: What is the role of the Communist Party today and tomorrow?

At this early stage of the discussion, as we probe and reassess the function of our Party, it seems to me that at least three general tendencies are discernable. Roughly, they can be described as follows:

One trend continues to advocate almost as of old the vanguard role of the Party. It stresses current great opportunities, it calls for the Party's immediate involvement in a variety of mass activities, it would plan the Party's intervention and the use of its influence in scores of situations, big and small, simultaneously. In this way it would combat left-sectarianism.

A second tendency is almost diametrically opposed to the first. It stresses our current isolation and it frankly questions our ability to play much of a role anywhere at the moment. The way out that it projects is a new mass party of Socialism—and very soon. This trend would disagree sharply with Dennis' caution against the "premature" formation of a new party of socialism.

A third current, with which I associate myself, seeks a sober and realistic estimate of our strength nationally, in particular industries and in given communities. On this basis it would project a few concrete, selected campaigns and activities, and would above all emphasize that our people in the trade union

movement and in mass organizations become the best fighters for the programs of those organizations. Wherever this program—or union negotiation demands—is in process of being drawn up, the Communists and progressives would attempt to influence this program based on the needs of the membership and the objective situation.

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ISN'T THIS "liquidationism?" What about our "vanguard role?" The first tendency actually sees our "vanguard role" today somewhat similar to what it was in the thirties. And yet how radically our relations with the common people of our land have changed in the last 20 years. Then we were in the ranks and, to a degree, in the leadership of the movements of the workers, the small farmers and the Negro people. We initiated programs, we supplied cadre, we helped organize, we encouraged a fighting spirit. The leadership of those forces was all too often either helpless or bankrupt—particularly in the early thirties. And the confidence of the ruling monopolies in their own system was badly shaken.

Today these very same class forces of the common people, 20 and 25 years later, have organization, cadre, program to one degree or another are in motion. And we are in too many instances neither in the ranks nor in the leadership of these movements. Big Business is temporarily enjoying economic prosperity and is politically confident about its future.

In this situation to speak of our vanguard role as of old, to project grand plans of leading and guiding the working people,

is to fly in the face of reality. (And that we've done with monotonous regularity all too often in our history). In addition, it is self-defeating.

But the question recurs: What about the future of our Party? While we must strive for a new mass party of socialism—and objective developments will play no small part in this—I don't believe we want or need a new party of Socialism to be born in our image—and prematurely at that. (Oh yes, we do want it to have some of our best characteristics). Consequently, I agree with Dennis that it will take some time for a mass party of socialism to mature in our country and that we have a major responsibility to "create the conditions for such a necessary and historic development."

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OUR "vanguard role" in the meantime, as I see it, might consist of: (1) more and more of our people belonging to, and fighting for the program of the trade unions, the Negro people's organizations, the community organizations; (2) fighting for a people's anti-monopoly coalition and advancing independent political activity and thought; and (3) preparing and distributing popular pamphlets and leaflets on such subjects as "The American Road to Socialism" and "What Socialism Would Mean to the USA" and, in general, stepping up our mass educational work for Socialism. We have to learn how to relate current issues to the question of socialism in the U. S. A. I will mention but two such issues. How natural it would be today to discuss socialism as related to the growing demand of the workers for supplementary unem-

ployment benefits, and to describe what a Socialist U.S.A. would mean to a worker's economic security and to steady employment.

Or consider a recent statement by Arthur F. Burns, economic adviser to the President, that "the threat of inflation or recession is never very distant when the economy is poised on a very high plateau." What is this if not a poorly veiled admission of the ever-recurring booms and busts of the system? Do we need better openings to discuss what socialism would mean to the U.S.A.?

On the second function—that of helping to develop independent political action as a special responsibility of a Communist today. As our people become more deeply acquainted with the history, program and activities of the union or mass organization they belong to, as additional Communists and progressives join these organizations, they will learn, slowly in some situations, more quickly in others, how to advance independent political action and thought. In the AFL-CIO Committee on Political Education (COPE) will be one approach, in the NAACP another, and in the PTA a third, but everywhere our people will need the consciousness, the guidance, the exchange of experience that are so vital in carrying through a major, coordinated undertaking of such importance.

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IN CHICAGO we might cite an industry, a community, a mass organization where the process of breaking our isolation is already under way and perhaps has even been in progress for a relatively long period.

And we are learning to avoid past left-sectarian errors and methods of work. But what else are these Communists doing? Shall we be satisfied with just that? Again, the question crops up—what about our "vanguard role?"

If we are to have an outlook for the immediate period of the threefold function of our Party that I have attempted to outline in this article, we will have to come to grips with the difficulties that our members in mass work face in trying to develop the other two functions: advancing independent political action and bringing socialist education to the people. But shouldn't our major concern today be with the need for breaking our isolation and ridding ourselves of left-sectarianism? Our discussion on our "vanguard role" could be endless, academic and barren, unless and until we break through our isolation.

I am not here advocating a mechanical three-stage approach to the problem: first, break our isolation; then, advance independent political action; and, finally, spread socialist education. I do think we should avoid at the moment an exaggerated and almost exclusive concern with the "vanguard role" by those who are already active in mass organizations. It is our duty, however, to patiently involve them in the probing of all aspects of our Party's functioning in today's conditions.

This path will not lead to storming the heavens nor will it lead to a blind alley of passivity and resignation. Neither will it be an easy path. We must realize where we start from and that many of the guide-posts of the

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ENGLESTEIN

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past may prove to be unreliable. This approach, however, may enable us to make a modest contribution to the struggles of the American people at this particular historical moment. Along with most Communists I look forward to the not distant future when advanced sections of the American working class and its allies will establish a mass party of socialism.