

Conversation About Communism

By **ABNER W. BERRY**

THE typewriters were clicking in the press room of the San Francisco City Auditorium where the recent convention of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was held. Into the room came a leading Negro politician and office holder to chat informally with newsmen. After waying greetings to the busy newsmen the political leader strolled over to this reporter and began casually:

"How are things going? I see by the papers that you guys are having a rugged time."

"Yes," I replied, "the going's kind of rough, all right, but we'll pull out of it."

His tone was not gloating. On the contrary there was a note of real concern in his query, and it was evident, since he didn't move immediately away, that my terse answer hadn't satisfied his quest for knowledge of what was happening to the political left.

"You know," the office holder went on unsolicited, "I'm an anti-Communist politically but I have never been against Communists as individuals. In fact, I have often wondered in recent years how people with such integrity, intelligence and dedication could have been so far off base as the Communists have been on most issues."

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HE ADDED that he was opposed to witchhunting, the Smith Act and McCarthyism and did not subscribe to the idea that the Communist Party was a conspiracy. Communists, as individuals, he expanded, were "some of the most intelligent people" he had ever known.

"I'm opposed to a lot of things

in the Communist Party program," he went on, "but I know they've done a lot of good things in the past. I'm honestly opposed, **POLITICALLY,**" — (emphasizing the word "politically")—"to many things about the Communist Party, just as I'm opposed to the Republican Party, but I don't want to see the party dispersed. What I say is that the party should get back on the track, that's all."

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HE THEN described his relationship to the Democratic Party as one which he thought would "help my people," and said there was much that he disagreed with in the party and that he fought against what he disagreed with. As to the basic principles, he said, he was sincere.

"Getting back to what you said about the Communist Party and the left," I said, "I want you to know that I agree with you that the party was 'off base' and that it has to 'get back on the track.' For the process of getting back on the track is a measure of its integrity and the integrity of its membership."

"Oh, I have never doubted the integrity or intelligence of individual Communists," he protested. "I know Ben Davis and like him as a person, although I have opposed him politically. All I'm saying is that the Communists have just been too far off base."

"I want to agree with you again," I replied, "and to respect your right to oppose the political program of the Communist Party. But I would add that I have never known a Communist who did not sincerely believe in the Communist Party and its program as an instrument for advancing the status of the Negro people and the welfare of

the nation as a whole. To this there was the most sincere dedication, despite the many errors which you describe as being 'off base.'"

"I'm just as convinced of that as you are," he came back.

"I know people don't go to jail for an idea or ideas they think are wrong but I still think a lot of things have to be changed."

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THERE was a pause at this point before he continued:

"Now take what's happening now. I hear that there is a meeting of the Communist Party national committee, but no one knows what is going on there, except for periodic statements. Is the national committee meeting now?"

I answered that it was my understanding that there had been a meeting of the national committee but I couldn't say how long it had met, adding that I had access only to the same press statements that were available to all newsmen.

"I think things should be more open," he asserted and continued: "For example, I hear there is going to be a party convention sometime soon. I'd like to attend that convention as a reporter and I know others who would. In my opinion, it would be good publicity for the party if its deliberations could be openly reported."

"That's a reasonable opinion," I agreed, "and though I have no authority over the nature of the convention and whether it is open to the press or not, I will certainly use whatever influence I have in that direction."

Deadline time rolled around, and being a newspaperman himself, the political leader took leave with a handshake, saying:

"Wish you luck in getting back on the track."