

LYL: Back to the Popular-Front Fraud

By MICHAEL HARRINGTON

In last week's issue of *Challenge*, we reported on the SDA convention. One of the events which took place there deserves much more detailed comment: the operations of the observer from the Labor Youth League. The LYL representative presented himself as an advocate of "unity," a foe of YSL membership, and in general associated himself with the right-wing leadership (which disavowed any connection with him later on) as much as he could.

As we noted in our analysis of the convention, this probably followed from two general considerations: first, the LYLER was implementing the new Stalinist Popular Front line; and second, he was driving to exclude a knowledgeable anti-Stalinist tendency from the organization.

It is this first aspect, the Popular Front, which requires more analysis. It must be remembered that the American youth movement has not had the experience of Stalinist Popular-Fronting and must be brought up to date on the whole question.

The general conception underlying any analysis of the Popular Front concerns the relation of Stalinist parties throughout the world to the Russian CP: the Stalinist parties act as agents of Moscow.

The various changes in Stalinist line outside of Russia are phrased in terms of the indigenous politics of the particular nation; the American party will proclaim that it is altering its position because of the needs of the American working class. But this sudden recognition of the needs of the American (or French, or Italian) workers is always preceded by a shift in Russia. And there is a strange coincidence of the newly discovered political reality in the country outside of Russia and the needs of Stalinist foreign policy.

LINE-SWITCHERS

The point is easy enough to document. Until the fall of 1939, the American CP was for the Popular Front, pro-Roosevelt, etc. Then came the Hitler-Stalin pact. The Stalinists became "anti-war" and joined with all kinds of elements, including far-right isolationists, in opposing Roosevelt. But when Russia was invaded, the imperialist war became a "democratic war," and the American CP appeared as an active follower of the ex-warmonger Franklin Roosevelt.

During this, the World War II period, the Popular Front line took the CP into support of piecemeal, speed-up, the no-strike pledge, etc., and into opposition to the struggle of the Negroes for equality in the armed forces. In 1945, Jacques Duclos wrote his famous letter, Earl Browder was expelled, the party moved

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"left," the Progressive Party was formed, etc.

Now Eugene Dennis has discovered that this was all a mistake. Purporting to base himself on an analysis of American conditions (which occurred to him after the Russians changed their line—the day after, you might say), he has now discovered that this was all a mistake, that it was left-sectarianism, and that American Communists must find their way back into the liberal-labor movement.

In Claude Lightfoot's report to the National Committee of the party, kind words are found even for ADA, which is described as if it were moving in the direction of a labor party.

HAVE THEY CHANGED?

Now all of this, as we mentioned before, is easy to document. Indeed, one can prove it by citing as an authority . . . the Communist Party of the U. S. A.

In its statement of June 24, the National Committee of the party said: "we admit frankly that we uncritically justified many foreign and domestic policies of the Soviet Union which are now shown to be wrong. We have begun to re-examine our previously oversimplified and wrong concept of the relations which should exist between the Marxists of various countries. . . ." Which is a euphemism for the admission that in the past the American CP was a simple tool of the Russians, and a statement that things will be different.

What about this point? Do the statements of Dennis, and those of the French, Italian, and English Communist Parties, really indicate that a basic change has taken place?

What is being asked is: has the nature of the various Communist Parties changed? Not whether sincere rank-and-filers want to change; not even whether a leader or two has been shaken up by the Twentieth Congress; but whether the parties themselves, as institutions, have been transformed. And here one must recognize a crucial notion: the relationship between the Communist Parties outside of Russia and the Russian ruling class.

CP'S BASE

In some countries, France and Italy for example, the Communist Parties have a mass base of their own. They have thousands of paid functionaries, hundreds of newspapers and magazines, unions, social clubs, and so on. In other countries, particularly in the United States, this is much less true. And this has made a difference. It has been clear that the American party has been treated as the poor relation of international Stalinism, that it has been handled more bureaucratically and arbitrarily than the French or Italian parties. But this difference does not define the institutional nature of the parties.

In the case of all Stalinist parties outside of Russia, one element is essential to the party's hold over its masses: that its leaders appear as the plenipotentiaries of Moscow, as the representatives of Russian "socialism" to this or that country. It is here that one encounters a fundamental element in the power of the various Communist Parties—their purported possession of the symbols of October, their claim to the tradition of revolutionary Marxism.

That this claim is a hoax and fraud is not the issue. The point is that millions accept the claim, and that every Communist Party in the world exploits it for all it's worth.

ROAD TO POWER

And more than this is involved. The present leaderships of the various Communist Parties all have this distinguishing feature: without exception, they all possess a history of uninterrupted subservience to the Russian CP.

They have all followed every twist and turn of Russian policy faithfully; they all outdid themselves and each other in condemning and expelling the Trotskyist and Lovestone-Brandler oppositions from the Communist International when that was decided upon by Stalin. Indeed, the present leaderships of the CP's are their present leaderships precisely because of this subservience; they run the Communist Parties because they proved to Moscow that their loyalty was undying.

But it is even deeper than that. For the question arises as to why none of these leaderships ever took the risk of breaking with Moscow, why they were so willing to be its tools.

The answer lies in the degeneration of the Russian Revolution and the ebbing of the revolutionary moods which had shaken Europe after the First World War. As a result of these phenomena in the mid-twenties, those who rule the CP's today decided that their road to power lay only through Moscow, via subservience to Stalin, and not along the road of international struggle for socialism. And with the further degeneration of the Russian Revolution and the emergence of a new ruling class, the leaderships of the various national CP's, cynical and hardened bureaucrats, began to dream of one day ruling in their own countries as the Russian bureaucrats ruled in Stalinland. They saw the road toward such a development as lying in the expansion of Russian power, to which, therefore they had to subordinate themselves totally.

Their road to power ran through Moscow, not through the class struggle.

NO BREAK

This relationship has not changed. Various Communist Parties may carp at Khrushchev, they may drag their feet on this or that point, but none of them can seriously break with Russian policy because they must be identified with that policy.

If any Stalinist party did reject some fundamental line—the popular front, say—its leadership would face the risk of being read out of the international Stalinist movement. In other words, the character of the Stalinist parties as agents of international Stalinism is embedded in their very nature; it is an aspect essential to those parties. It hasn't changed because it can't.

We gladly accept the American CP's admission of how it operated in the past; but we reject the notion that it will change in the future. That is not dependent on a sudden thought in the night occurring to Dennis about the American working class right after he has read the latest dictate of the Russian ruling class; that change is made impossible by the nature of the party itself.

But then how will this Popular Front line manifest itself?

There is no way to speak of the politics of Stalinist parties as "left" or "right" because that assumes that they are motivated by a response to the situation in their own country, and not, as is the case, by a response to the situation of the Russian Stalinist ruling class. But the politics of the Popular Front will have the quality of a "right-wing" turn, i.e., the American Stalinists will become

quite unradical, try to appear to be liberals just like everybody else; they will move toward the official centers of lib-lab power, and so on.

This, for example, explains why Walter Reuther, long an arch-enemy of the workingclass in the Stalinist press, was discussed at the National Committee meeting of the American CP in friendly terms. This is why Dennis now repudiates the Progressive Party policy, the split from the CIO; this is why he denounces "left sectarianism." All of these changes are phrased as if they develop out of the CP's re-evaluation of the American scene, but this rediscovery of America, as we pointed out before, is a function of a shift in Moscow, not in the United States.

RUSSIAN-ORIENTED

And this brings us back to the role of the LYL at the SDA convention.

Here we have the LYL representative calling for unity, moderation, expelling the radicals, chatting amiably with the right-wingers, standing on the fringe of their caucus at the parking-lot meeting, and so on. When the LYL representative spoke from the floor, it was as if he had no interest in his own organization; his ruling passion, it seemed, was the health and wellbeing of SDA—and an SDA under the control of the right wing.

So our basic point has to be repeated in the case of LYL and SDA: The LYL observer's "right" policy is not a consequence of a sudden decision on the part of the LYL that the politics of moderation are the best politics. It follows from the same general considerations which rule in the case of the American CP: the needs of international Stalinism, specifically the Russian ruling class, now demand a Popular Front turn, and all of the myriad agents of that ruling class throughout the world are turning.

This has important consequences for the American youth movement in the future.

For one thing, the politics of the Popular Front are not so identifiable as those of a "left," Progressive-Party-type, turn Stalinists will not rasp away about Russia; indeed they will hardly be contentious at all. They will endeavor to make themselves the organizational loyalists of the lib-lab movement; they will be for unity, unity, unity. And in doing so, it may well be that they will confuse many sincere young students.

EPITHETS

They will argue that articles such as this are "sectarian," red-baiting, etc. The point is an important one to clear up.

Discussion of Stalinist politics and Stalinist Parties, intransigent opposition to them, is not "red-baiting." Informing, calling on the cops, fingering Stalinists for the government—in general, joining in with that indiscriminate, anti-libertarian, buckshot approach of the right-wing—that is red-baiting. But fighting the Stalinist politically, defeating them because their ideas and purposes are alien to democracy, that is not red-baiting; it is rather the obligation of every democrat, liberal or socialist.

Similarly with the epithet "sectarian." This charge often has an appeal among liberals whose general ideology (reform, class-collaboration, an "unlightened capitalism," etc.) does not dispose them to notions of the necessity for sharp struggle, especially when the fight must be waged against those who present themselves as just another-kind-of-left-winger. And here is where the crucial point recurs.

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