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A Belated Stalinist Correction

After 15 years the American Communist Party has finally taken official cognizance of their betrayal in 1941 of the fundamental principle of working class defense of democratic rights and civil liberties for all victims of capitalist persecution. The case in point was the first Smith Act trial in Minneapolis in which 18 members and leaders of the Socialist Workers Party and Minneapolis Teamsters Union were railroaded to prison under that anti-labor, witch-hunt statute.

In a report to an enlarged plenum of the CP national committee, Simon Gerson, chariman of a special committee on civil liberties, noted that, "the Party" had "made 'some serious errors,' including specifically the failure to defend the Minneapolis Trotskyites in the Teamsters Union in 1941." (Daily Worker, May 6).

While this specific "error" had been noted before by various individual Stalinist spokesmen it is the first time that it has been made more or less "official." This is all to the good, so far as it goes. But the "correction" does not go far enough. It is only a half truth which glosses over and attempts to minimize the magnitude of the error. Nor does it disclose its source. Unless the extent and source of the "error" is acknowledged no real and lasting correction can ensue.

First, to put the record straight. The CP did not play a passive role in the Minneapolis Smith Act case. It was not merely their "failure to defend" but their active opposition to the defense of the Minneapolis victims that aroused the burning indignation of wide circles in the liberal and labor movement. They actively supported the prosecution and did everything in their power to sabotage the defense movement.

Fifteen years ago the Stalinists were a power in the labor movement. They controlled the Minnesota State CIO. They were in control of the CIO on the West Coast. They controlled numerous CIO State and City CIO Councils, International and Local unions and their influence extended into many AFL units. In each case they threw the weight of their power and influence on the side of the witch hunters. Despite their rabid opposition, unions representing over five million workers supported the Minneapolis defendants.

If the Stalinists had added their weight to the Minneapolis defense movement against the first Smith Act frame-up the subsequent result could have been different. It is undeniable that Stalinist sabotage of the Minneapolis case led inexorably to the victimization of leaders and members of the American Communist Party under the same statute. No small "error" this!

What about the source of the "error?" Was it a transient aberration that led to an "unfortunate" violation of working-class principle? If that was all that is involved the confession of error, the correction of a previously unprincipled policy, the promise not to repeat the "error" in the future, could be taken at its face value. But more, much more is involved.

It is no accident that the "error" was committed precisely in a case involving Trotskyists. The American CP leaders are now in the process of repudiating the "Stalin cult." They admit that in the past they had accepted "uncritically" all of the pronouncements coming out of Moscow, including support of Stalin's purge trials. Their "error" in the Minneapolis case can be directly traced to the infamous Moscow frame-up trials. In fact, they repeated the same abusive slanders, stigmatizing the Minneapolis defendants as "seditious spies, wreckers, diversionists and saboteurs."

So long as the American CP does not openly repudiate the Moscow frame-up trials the source of the "error" remains untouched and can give rise to similar "errors" in the future. And its no good waiting for Moscow to do it first.