

On the Status of the Party

By Dorothy R. Healey

The author of the following article is a well-known Communist leader from southern California, and is a member of the National Committee. She presents in these pages her views of some aspects of problems within the Communist Party; readers are invited to participate in this discussion.—Editor.

The most serious aspects of the continuing crisis within the Communist Party is the growing separation of Communist from his fellow-Communist, the polarizing of opinion in some sections, with growing confusion and bewilderment in others, all leading to the continuing fragmentation of the Party.

Name-calling and abstract definitions (dogmatism vs. revisionism) have become a *substitute* for debate and concrete examination of facts. Lenin and Marx called plenty of "names" but they made political characterization based on substantial documentation. Our debates are replete with the "names" without the documentation. The debaters tend to become wedded to one-sided estimates and frozen positions, and the realities of political life become distorted.

*What is, he sees as in a dream,
What no longer is, becomes for
him reality.*

It might be helpful if there was a restatement of Marxist truisms in order to establish what, if any, long-standing problems are being reflected in our current struggle.

It was Marx and Lenin who insisted that the primary role of Communists was to guarantee the union of the labor movement with Marxist theory. This fusion cannot take place, and we cannot play a vanguard role, unless we utilize Marxist analysis to define and analyze each particular period of the class struggle and draw new theoretical conclusions from the realities of the material world. An equally obvious truth is that we cannot test the correctness of that analysis in an ivory tower; the verification or modification of our estimates takes place in the arena of class struggle. Without this approach, we cannot participate in developing the forms of struggle necessary for a given situation, nor relate the current phases of struggle to our goal of socialism.

The history of working class parties documents the dialectical contradiction always present: how to participate in daily mass struggles while advancing the struggle for socialism. Communist Parties must always deal with two dangers: abandoning the mass character of the Party, or abandoning its final aim—either falling into reformism or sectarianism. When the Party loses its mass character, and cannot speak to nor influence the mass movements, it becomes a sect. When it loses itself in the daily struggles as ends in themselves, it becomes a movement of social reform.

These are generalizations which have had much validity in all countries. An examination of our own history would show our inability at various times to effectively cope with either danger.

In addition to these general factors, our 16th Convention gave these specific reasons for the Party crisis:

The Marxist movement in our country has suffered historically from dogmatic application of Marxist theory to the American scene. The Communist Party inherited these weaknesses. Insufficient development of the independent theoretical work of our Party over the past decades has contributed towards our doctrinaire acceptance and mechanical application of many theoretical propositions.

Our Party has suffered from an oversimplified approach to and an uncritical acceptance of many views of Marxists and Marxist Parties in

other countries.

Bureaucratic methods of leadership, failure to develop inner Party democracy and a frequently intolerant attitude to the people we worked with have been in large measure responsible for our inability to correct mistakes in time, as well as for much of our sectarianism. All these factors are interrelated; each helped to reinforce the other.

It is one year since our 16th Convention. Have we had a leadership that has fulfilled its responsibilities in taking even the first steps in providing a political line that guards against the generalized two dangers mentioned above, and against the concrete errors specified at our Convention? A scrutiny of the last year would indicate that this has not taken place. But we have succeeded in vulgarizing a complex problem with the oversimplified definition of "Right" and "Left" trends.

There are comrades who say that the main danger is revisionism, and then demand: "Let's get down to work—and let the theoretical questions wait." But this approach has frequently been the foundation for reformism; it has been the slogan of the revisionists.

Gene Dennis correctly attacked this approach in 1945 in analyzing the Browder period. He said then: ". . . We were reacting to certain events . . . piecemeal, in an isolated and limited way, and without political visions." In 1945 he empha-

sized that theory must serve as a guide to action.

Our District (Southern California) has attempted to provide leadership on some political fronts of immediate concern to the welfare of the people. The H-bomb campaign, Little Rock and the South in general, the struggle for Negro rights, the 1958 elections and the anti-labor drive in California were among the questions discussed at the District Council, with concrete program proposed to the clubs for action. But we recognized that the main answer to our crisis was not "to get busy"; our crisis did not result from the fact that we were not "busy" enough in previous years; it is, in the first place, an ideological crisis.

Why do I believe that we have vulgarized our problems with the over-simplified definitions of "Right and Left dangers"? An answer to this is provided by the contradiction in Comrade James Jackson's report on the South [published in *Political Affairs* Dec. 1957]. He gave important data on the transition which is taking place there, as well as political emphasis on the need for Negro-labor unity. Lacking from his report is any basic estimate as to the character and ideology of the Negro people's movement, as well as any basic analysis as to what is new in it, namely, the fusion of the traditional cultural expression of the Negro people (traditions and institutions of the Church) with the modified

ideology of Thoreau and Gandhi.

In classic Marxist language, this lack of analysis would be defined as opportunism, yet it comes from a comrade who has identified himself generally with the "Left." It is an example of why Lenin considered opportunism and sectarianism as opposite sides of the same coin.

One of the reasons for our inability to develop Marxist critique was our past mis-use of this weapon. When we were critical of labor or Negro leaders in the past, we automatically translated this into oppositionist tactics; our criticism became a program for a one-sided attack on them.

A Marxist critique (e.g., a critical, many-sided analysis) should assist the struggle, not attack it, and is an important expression of our vanguard role.

Comrade Dennis has advanced the theory that in order to prepare a program, it is necessary to first accept (and not even question) the universal validity of specific concepts projected by our comrades in the socialist countries. It may well be that after examination and debate, most Communists will agree on their validity and application to the United States. But how can a comrade carry through the 16th Convention warning against "the over-simplified approach to and uncritical acceptance of views of Marxists in other countries" if he insists on the acceptance of their views,

without debate or question?

A Marxist-Leninist party might well remember Lenin's warning: "Nothing is more foreign to the dialectic method of Marxists' thought than to separate social phenomena from their historic soil and to present these phenomena as abstract formulae having an absolute, general application."

Comrade Dennis might argue: "But I did not say anything about application of the universally valid truths, only their acceptance as general truths" . . . but until and unless one discusses application, it is meaningless to talk about an abstract truth.

Why is application so important? The Twelve Party Statement declares that one or another form of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat is a universally valid truth. Do we Communists apply Marxism-Leninism to the American scene by simply repeating this, or do we have to give considerable attention to the phrase "one or another form"? When, for example, we discuss the capitalist state, we know that bourgeois democracy and fascism are "one or another form" of capitalist rule—but what a whale of a difference it makes to the working class which form it is!

There are theoretical questions of great significance in the 12 Party Statement. As one additional example: "The working class can then defeat the reactionary anti-popular forces, secure a firm majority in Par-

liament, transform parliament from an instrument serving the class interests of the bourgeoisie into an instrument serving the working people. . . ." In other words, it is no longer necessary to regard as a universally valid principle Lenin's conclusions that the working class must "shatter" the instruments of bourgeois rule, the bourgeois state forms.

I would applaud our comrades' willingness to analyze the realities of the material world of today, and advance new theory, even when it disputes previous theoretical propositions. But what kind of Marxism-Leninism is it which calls for automatic endorsement of such a concept, without the most extended theoretical discussion?

Because our past sectarianism led us to distort the application of Marxist criticism, we have great difficulty in searching for a balanced expression of proletarian internationalism, particularly as applied towards the Soviet Union.

Comrade James Allen's report in *Political Affairs* (Dec., 1957) on the international situation suffers from an inability to deal with questions of foreign policy relating to the Soviet Union in anything except the language and approach common to all of us before the 20th Congress and the 16th National Convention. Does it equip us to understand the role of the Soviet Union in the Middle East? Does it help us to understand if there is any difference between

what the Soviet Union does diplomatically (as a Government) and our role and estimates as a Party in the United States? Or, does it continue to do what Duclos criticized us for in 1945, the automatic translating of diplomatic actions into ideological and political programs for the Party?

Many comrades cannot visualize being both pro-Soviet and critical. Every attempt to critically examine the history and present status of the Soviet Union is considered "anti-Soviet." It is true that after the 20th Congress, some believed that if you did not have perfection in the Soviet Union, you could not have socialism. But the opposite is also present, many believe that if you do not think there is perfection in the Soviet Union, you are anti-Soviet *per se*.

The CPSU, in the 20th Congress, said that their policy in 1947 towards Turkey had not been always correct. In 1957, when they removed Molotov, Shepilov and Kaganovich, and later Zhukov, they said that among other reasons for their removal, was the charge that they had followed an "adventurous" foreign policy. Yet there are some comrades who believe either that a Socialist country cannot make mistakes in foreign policy, or that one can say so only after they are self-admitted. (As a matter of fact, even *after* the CPSU admits mistakes, we have comrades who consider it "anti-Soviet" to re-

peat the fact of the mistake, or try to analyze it!)

Distorted, one-sided approaches towards the Soviet Union result in making it appear that debates on the Soviet Union are composed:

(a) Of comrades who would spend their lives criticizing some other country's revolution to the exclusion of solving the task of winning the workers of their own nation to socialist consciousness; or

(b) Of comrades who would spend their lives defending another country's revolution to the exclusion of solving the tasks in their own country.

The "unity" of the extremes is once more displayed; it doesn't make much difference if you slash your left wrist or your right wrist—you can still bleed to death as a result.

The Convention Resolution stated that Right-opportunism is encouraged by dogmatism and sectarianism. Because some national leaders continued to duck the problem posed by the Resolution, the *Daily Worker* on some occasions tended towards a one-sided and provocative approach towards the Soviet Union. This, too, did not prove helpful in trying to establish how to be critical in a partisan manner.

When John Gates left the Party, the *N. Y. Times* reported that he said there was no political democracy in the Soviet Union, but that in the United States we can elect our representatives, have free speech, etc.

We may be critical of the time-lag between the Socialist economy and its reflection in the Socialist super-structure of the State, the institutions, etc. But that is no reason to replace a Marxian analysis with one that speaks admiringly of the "equal freedom of the rich and the poor to sleep under a bridge," which, to a great extent, is the content of our "free" elections.

G. D. H. Cole, eminent British Marxist, who is very "respectable" and "acceptable," says about the Soviet Union:

Socialism is no guarantee of a perfect society. Common ownership of the means of production . . . can co-exist with grave faults in political and cultural affairs. They are not even guarantees of democracy, though they are *conditions* of its full effectiveness and valuable soil for its growth. . . . The ruling consideration for us . . . is that the Soviet Union is, by virtue of its basic economic and cultural institutions a Socialist country, and therefore necessarily the principal rallying point for the forces of Socialism throughout the world.

The 16th Convention tried to guard against the danger of the sect and the danger of the reformist movement. It developed an initial approach on how to explore the new, without automatically throwing everything "old" out. In a preliminary manner, it tried to utilize Engel's own definition of Marxism as "the exposition of a process of evo-

lution." But because the "habits of the past" are our main adversary, every attempt to examine the realities of the American scene is met with the charge of revisionism.

Why all the sound and fury of Comrade Foster's attack on Alex Bittelman? One does not have to agree with all of Bittelman's conclusions (and I, for one, do not) to appreciate what he is doing.

The 20th Congress stated that as a result of socialism developing into a world system, and with the increased importance of the role played by the neutralist countries, war is no longer inevitable.

Fine. We repeated this as being true. But one cannot state this without attempting to deal with the corollary: if you can put a strait-jacket on imperialism, what happens to its contradictions? What new forms will the uneven development of capitalism take?

Bittelman is the first comrade who advanced a systematic exposition of this question. If, instead of his ferocious attack, Foster and those who agree with him, had tried to tackle this problem, there might have been a diminution of the party crisis rather than its acceleration.

The logic of this kind of attack is clear. First, Gates is identified as the "main danger." Then, anyone who fails to agree that he is the *main* danger, or wants to fight the ideology but not the man, is a conciliatorist, and then graduates to

become a new "main danger consuming the party." Next, anyone who has the effrontery to dare to go beyond what is already "safe" to say on theoretical questions is a revisionist and a new "main danger."

But don't think the attack can be contained within these limits. As more and more comrades leave the Party, the 6th World Congress devotees, who want a return to defining social-democrats as social-fascists, and the sole emphasis again on united front from below, become both stronger and bolder. Now, while "praising" Foster for continuing his attack on revisionism, they attack him for his revisionism in agreeing that Left errors were committed in the last decade!

The tragic farce will play on: ultimately, at the drop of a new thought, the so-called "Left" and "center" forces will find themselves either forced to accept the "line" of these people, or else be in the "prisoner's dock" themselves.

Comrades like Dennis, Thompson, Jackson et al. might well remember Stalin's warning: "There is a logic in events which goes beyond the logic of human intentions."

You may deride the comrades who are leaving the Party as "confused, or weak, or disorientated," etc. But you can ultimately be consumed by your present allies.

Every time another comrade who wants "change" to guarantee the Party as a more meaningful instru-

ment for winning Americans to Socialism, leaves our Party, he is helping to prevent change from taking place. Nothing develops in a vacuum, and to find the new approaches and the new theory, requires both the determination and discipline to "re-make" ourselves as Communists, and a developing of the Party as a collective channel through which this process is developed. There are comrades who would give their lives for the cause of Socialism, but who cannot (say: will not) change their lives in order to guarantee that the Party of Socialism becomes an organization that can influence the American working class.

Those who so sweepingly have proclaimed "the Party cannot change, there is no future for it," distort Marxism as much as the dogmatists. Did anyone seriously believe that the Party could change overnight? Did anyone believe it could change without the most extended struggle "against our main adversary—the habits of the past" (Gramsci)?

Without a perspective of an extended period of ideological struggle (yes, "peaceful co-existence" for the body of each comrade and sharpened debate for the mind) neither we nor the Party can participate with others in finding some answers for the todays and the tomorrows.

I am a part of the national leadership and I do not disclaim responsibility for the present morass.

I, and others, have been so preoccupied with fending off the offensive of those who would destroy the Convention's estimates and perspectives, without even giving the Party a decent opportunity to apply them, that I failed to participate in helping to advance the initial approaches of the Convention.

It is not enough to shout a warning that the theft of the Convention Resolution is taking place. Sufficient objectivity and disengagement from the furious struggle to "protect" the 16th Convention must include the further exposition of the Convention's line in order to prove in life what and who is right or wrong.

We are paying a bitter penalty for our past failure to involve the membership in discussion on basic line and policy. Clubs were told their job was to carry out policy; the sole emphasis on "bringing down the line" was how to apply it, rarely, to debate it. As a result, there is great confusion when the debates in national bodies are presented.

In the pre-convention period, everyone united in criticizing the leadership for failing to report on past differences in leading committees. Today, many are unhappy at hearing such report. They say: leave the national debates back in New York, and let's discuss only our local problems. But ours is a national party, and one area or another cannot solve its problems by hiding

the nature and content of the status of the national Party.

Further, unless comrades know what positions are taken on particular problems, how can they estimate which comrades should be continued in leadership? How can they tell which comrades make any effort to combat bureaucracy or carry out the decisions of the Convention?

Yes, we agree, it is distracting and confusing and unpleasant to deal with what seem far-away problems. But if we want to check the crisis, we cannot evade the grim duty of facing the content of the present problems.

If subjective and factionalist reactions were laid aside, I do not believe that anyone would seriously claim that in the last year we have won the fight against dogmatism and sectarianism. Nor do I believe that anyone would contend that we have built-in safeguards against Right opportunism. "We cannot secure ourselves in advance against all possibilities of opportunist deviations. Such dangers can be overcome only in the course of the movement itself, utilizing Marxist theory, but only after the dangers in question have taken tangible form." When Lenin wrote "Left-Wing Communism, An Infantile Disorder," he did not cross himself on each page and say: "and I'm against opportunism, too." He tried to guard against opportunism in the method and line he advanced in fighting leftism.

Perhaps the saddest line in Khrushchev's revelations on Stalin was that Stalin thought he acted in the interests of Socialism. I suppose each of us is positive of the "purity" of our intentions, and the fiendishness of the other's intent. But where, is that comrade, or group of comrades, who has been so infallible in the past, that would allow for the continuing arrogance so present today?

Our Party must be able to contain within it people with divergent points of view. To demand doctrinal unity or purity would be to guarantee either its disintegration or its vegetation.

The Party must be a channel through which contending viewpoints can be presented. It should encourage the widest utilization of every form to provide for the clari-

fication of ideas. It should provide for collective examination of the work of Communists in mass activity in order to learn, and in turn, teach how to fuse the daily struggles with socialist ideology.

"If a book be false in its facts, disprove them; if false in its reasoning, refute it. But for God's sake, let us freely hear both sides," says Thomas Jefferson. John Milton put it: "And though all the winds of doctrine were let loose to play upon the earth, so Truth be in the field, we do injuriously, by licensing and prohibiting, so misdoubt her strength. Let her and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter." Mao Tse-tung says: "... let a hundred flowers blossom; let all the schools contend. . . ." These too, are universally valid truths!