

PROBLEMS OF THE SOCIALIST YOUTH MOVEMENT

I. History of the Socialist Youth Movement (From its origins to 1919).

The Socialist youth movement is a product of the era of capitalist imperialism. In the 1880's, 1890's the social democratic parties and trade unions began to organize young people to counteract the widespread militarisation of the youth and the use of the army against workers in strikes and demonstrations; and to win the youth for socialism.

In Belgium, for example, the Young Guards arose during the strike wave of 1885-6 (affecting particularly the miners) when the army was employed as a strikebreaking instrument. For years later the youth league was almost exclusively an anti-militarist (Socialist) organization.

In other countries however, the original impetus for the youth league was either the economic conditions of the young workers (apprentices above all) as in Austria (Young Workers' League of Austria); or the need for general socialist education of the young people, as in the United States (1907). In all cases the youth league was controlled by the respective party; by local party bodies or by the national committee of the party. In the later case, a more or less centralized national youth league existed enjoying a great deal of autonomy (Belgium, Holland, Italy).

The (Second) Socialist International (formed in 1889) on several occasions urged the organization of young people by the national parties. (See, for example, the anti-militarist resolution of the 1900 congress.) Through the efforts of left wing Socialists, the first international socialist youth conference was held at Stuttgart on August 24 to 26, 1907. This reflected the new spirit and influence of the revolutionary Socialists following the Russian Revolution of 1905. On the wave of the militant spirit, the 'International Union of Social

ist Youth Organizations' was founded at the Stuttgart Congress. Delegates included youth and adult comrades. Henrietta Roland-Holst (Holland), Henri de Man (Belgium) and Karl Liebknecht (Germany) were the leading figures. They had been the organizers of the youth leagues in the respective countries. As left wing Socialists they appreciated the importance of anti-militarist work and the youth movement.

At Stuttgart there were twenty delegates representing eleven leagues (92,000 members): Germany, Belgium, Holland, Austria, Italy, Spain, Bohemia, Switzerland, Hungary. Reports and resolutions were adopted on militarism, socialist education and cultural work and on the economic conditions of the young workers. The militant anti-war resolution adopted by the Socialist International in the same city prior to the youth conference set the tone for the latter's position. An international bureau of five, including Roland-Holst, De Man and Liebknecht (and one from Sweden and one from Austria) was elected.

However, the defeat of the Russian Revolution and the ensuing ebb of the wave of militancy in Western Europe, led to a set-back of the left-wing and youth movements. In Germany in 1908, the Congress of the Social Democratic Party dissolved the North German, South German and local youth organizations. Special party committees were organized to carry on work among the youth. . . . The party leadership established a "Central Committee of the Working Youth of Germany",

The right-wing Social Democrats feared particularly the anti-militarist work of the youth league. Their policies were based on a legal and parliamentary struggle for socialism; militant anti-militarist work led to difficulties with the police and the courts. They therefore desired the maximum and the most direct control of the youth to confine their activities to general socialist education and cultural and sports activities. Similar steps were taken in Austria and Holland.

The Second Congress of the socialist youth international was held

at Basle. (Nov. 25, 1912). The decisions were primarily a reiteration of the first Congress resolutions. The Italian delegates urged the strengthening of the international Socialist youth organization, while Karl Dannenburg (Austria), international youth secretary, proposed complete subordination of the international buro to the executive committee of the Socialist International. (The election of the buro by the latter). Action on the proposals was tabled.

In early 1914, the youth international had 15 organizations with a membership of 170,000. When the World War broke out the corresponding adult body collapsed. The decisive national parties supported the imperialist war. The executive committees of various leagues (Germany, Austria, France) also became social-patriotic. The Italian League, together with the Scandinavian and Swiss) initiated the first Socialist Youth conference since the outbreak of war. The Berne youth conference took place April, 1915, with the participation of sixteen delegates from ten countries representing leagues, oppositions and left-wing parties (Poland and Russia). The youth delegates claimed a total membership of 33,000. (Italy, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Holland, Switzerland, Bulgaria, Germany). The resolutions were clearly internationalist in character. Social-patriotism was denounced; the adult and young workers were called upon to continue the class struggle during and against the war for socialism. October 3, 1915 was designated as the first International Youth Day for demonstration against imperialist war and for socialism. A new buro was elected, with Willi Munzenburg as secretary. The buro published the "International of Youth" and participated in the left wing Socialist conferences at Zimmerwald, Sept. 1915, and Kienthal, April 1916.

The Berne conference resolutions did not call for a complete organizational break with the social-patriotic Second International and in general reflected the hesitancy of the left-wing movement. It was

not until the Russian Revolution of Nov. 1917 that the conception of the Third International as an immediate need was accepted outside the Russian Bolshevik Party. In October, 1918, the All-Russian Young Communist League was organized. (Prior to the Revolution there was no separate socialist youth organization.) On March 2 to 6th, 1919 the Third International was founded at Moscow. Several youth leagues affiliated to the International.

On November 20 to 26th, 1919, the Young Communist International was established in Berlin. Its decisions were in general agreement with the line of the Communist International. In its program, however, the Congress considered the tasks of the leagues on an equal and parallel basis as those of the parties.

It is not strange that this view was strongly supported by all the non-Russian delegates. During and immediately following the war, the leagues were in reality "youth parties", that is, small organizations of the most conscious youth who in practise were in the leadership of militant and revolutionary actions (jointly with their party comrades). Special youth needs and forms of work were completely subordinated to the more immediate problems of the working class struggle for power.

Also, the revolutionary youth sought to avoid the fatal experiences of the pre-war days when the party leadership controlled and stifled the youth leagues. This conflict over the relation of the party and the league was not settled even formally until the Second Congress of the Y.C.I., 1921 adopted the position established by the Third Congress of the Comintern (1921) which made the national league politically subordinate to the respective party, while organizationally autonomous.

Bibliography (There is no comprehensive history of the Socialist youth movement in English. There are several histories in German,  
(over)

notably, Schuller's History of the Youth Movement. Other material can be found in magazines, "The International of Youth" and in "Young Sparticus").

Karl Liebknecht "Militarism and Anti-Militarism"  
(second section)  
A Short History of the Young Communist League (1928) (Out of Print).

\*\*\*\*\*  
\*\*\*\*\*  
\*\*\*\*

## II. THE YOUNG COMMUNIST INTERNATIONAL (1919-1938)

On November 1st, 1920, the Russian Young Communist League proposed to the Executive Committee of the Y.C.I. a change in the relation between the youth leagues and the parties. The proposal called for the political subordination of each national league to the respective party organization; while each league would retain its "organizational independence". In other words, the party in each country would determine the general politics of the entire communist movement, its strategy and tactics in agreement with the line and leadership of the Communist International - and the youth leagues would be guided by these decisions. On the other hand, the party could not interfere in the internal organizational problems of the youth league except in advisory capacity. More precisely therefore the youth league would enjoy organizational autonomy.

However, the Executive Committee of the Y.C.I. did not agree with this proposal. It held to the view of the independence of the leagues and the cooperation on a basis of equality between each party and league..

The Second Congress of the Y.C.I. was to resolve the dispute. The motion of the Russian Y.C.L. to hold the Congress in Moscow was

defeated in favor of Jena, Germany. The Congress opened in the later<sup>t</sup> city on April 6th, 1921 and moved for reasons of illegality (on April 10th) to Berlin. The resolution on the political situation adopted by the Congress revealed that the differences on the organizational question had other political roots: the majority supported "the theory of the revolutionary offensive" which held that despite the defeats of the workers in 1919-1920 and the renewed offensive of capital, no partial retreats were necessary in the struggle for state power; the working class had to continue frontal, direct attacks against the capitalist governments. This theory was defended by Brandler, Bela Kun, Bukharin and others at the Third Congress of the Communist International. Lenin and Trotsky were known opponents of this schematic conception of the "permanent revolution".

On the advice of the Executive Committee of the Comintern, the Y.C.I. Congress "continued" in Moscow from June 9th to the 23rd, immediately preceding the Third Congress of the Comintern. The latter almost split over the "theory of the revolutionary offensive" when the majority appeared to be in complete agreement with it. Lenin and Trotsky, who recognized the need for winning a decisive majority of the workers in the various countries before a direct bid for power could be made by the vanguard and urged the struggle for partial, immediate demands as a means towards this end, finally succeeded in winning the delegates to their views. The Third Congress issued the slogan: "To the masses" as a summary of the immediate tasks of the communist parties.

It also adopted theses on "The Communist International and the Young Communist Movement" which had been worked out in consultations between the Bolshevik Party and Y.C.I. leaders during the Y.C.I. Congress. These theses, whose line had been accepted by the Y.C.I. Congress, contain the basic conceptions of the early

communist movement on the character of the revolutionary youth movement and the principles of the youth movement for the Fourth International today. (Resolution appended).

The transformation of the small youth leagues into mass organizations of young workers and students, larger than the parties, was never achieved outside the Soviet Union. The progress of the leagues necessarily were dependant on the growth of the parties and the special attention paid to the youth leagues by the parties. In the brief period from the Third Congress to Lenin's death the problem of the party itself, its elementary organization, strategy and tactics, overshadowed the problems of the youth. The internal difficulties in the communist parties - with currents in the parties who had not as yet broken politically with centrism as well as the more radical, ultra-left elements who rejected the struggle for partial demands - hampered the development of mass young communist leagues.

At the Third Congress of the Y.C.I., December 4th to the 12th, 1922(at the time of the Fourth Congress of the Comintern) little progress could be recorded in the growth of the leagues. As against 600,000 claimed at the previous Congress, it was now reported that the Y.C.I. had 750,000 members, primarily a result of the increase of the Russian league 38 YCL sections as against 36 at the previous Congress. While some of the leagues had been engaged in economic activities of the young workers and anti-militarist work the resolutions record: "Anti-militarist work has practically remained stationary". "Education work was limited mostly to the members". "The Young Communist Leagues have not yet become mass organizations...".

The Congress adopted a draft program for the Y.C.I., a program of economic demands for young workers "up to 18 years of age", and

an organization resolution which established the "shop nucleus" (and the student nucleus) as the basic form of organization of the leagues. Shop nuclei or groups in a given neighborhood were to be united in branches. Those not employed in factories or employed in a factory<sup>where</sup> insufficient YCLers existed for a nucleus) were to belong directly to the branch. This form of organization, based on the Russian Y.C.L. and C.P., was accepted in theory by all the leagues but never actually formed the basis of the non-Russian organizations.

From late 1923 to the present time the Young Communist Leagues were utilized as factional pawns in the Communist International, first by Zinoviev and Stalin against "Trotskyism" and then by Stalin against Zinoviev and Trotsky.

In late 1923, Leon Trotsky in his "New Course" wrote:

"It is wholly inadequate that the youth should repeat our formulas, it is necessary that the youth should take the revolutionary formulae fighting, transform them into flesh and blood, work out for themselves, their own opinion, their own personality, and be able to fight for their own opinion with that courage which comes from sincere conviction and independence of character. Passive obedience, mechanical drill, characterless, obsequiousness, careerism - away with these things from the party!"

Trotsky was accused of "pitting the youth against the Old Bolsheviks". Young workers who accepted Trotsky's advice (or his political criticisms of the ruling regime) were treated as opponents of Bolshevism and later expelled from the Y.C.L.'s (in Russia, the treatment was far more severe).

On July 13th to the 25th 1924 the Fourth Congress of the Y.C.I. opened up the international campaign for "Bolshevisation" (simultaneous with the campaign of the Fifth Congress of the Comin-



tern). The YCL in every country was made the tool of the dominant faction in the party in the struggle against "Trotskyism" or alleged "Trotskyites". Critical education of the young communists became impossible: factional obedience and loyalty were the tests of youth leaders, who in turn transmitted these traits to the ranks.

An outstanding leader of the Third Congress of the Y.C.I., a follower of Zinoviev, Vuyo Vuyovitch was removed from the international leadership and later expelled and exiled to Siberia because of his support to the United Opposition of Trotsky and Zinoviev.

At the Fifth Congress of the Y.C.I., August 20th to September 18th 1928 (following the Sixth Congress of the Comintern) the old formulae on the character of the YCL were repeated in resolutions and in the program: Trotskyism was condemned and Stalinism endorsed. No real progress could be noted in the development of the strength or influence of the leagues.

It was only during the most reactionary period of the Communist International that the Young Communist Leagues grew in strength and influence - in the interests of social patriotism and reaction. The Peoples Front course in France led to the growth of the French Y.C.L. with its slogan of the "Front of the Younger Generation" and unity of all French youth irrespective of class character.

The Sixth Congress of the Y.C.I., October, 1935 (following the Seventh Congress of the Comintern) generalized the experiences of the French league, called for organizations of the "Front of the Younger Generation" in each country and the formation of "United Youth Leagues" which would not have a programmatic position on the road to power or be affiliated to any party. The latter slogan was connected with the proposal for organic unity with the Young Socialist International and the young socialist leagues. These policies marked the formal abandonment of the earlier conceptions

of the youth movement .

In Spain such unity was achieved; numerically the movement grew at the expense of the destruction of the revolutionary politics and militant activity of the former Young Socialist League. In Belgium unity was also achieved; here, due to the opposition of the Belgian Labor Party and the weakness of the Communist Party, little growth has taken place; but here also the leftward development of the Socialist Young Guards was stultified. Most recently the leaders of the Belgian Labor Party decided that members of the Young Guards could not be members of any other party (except the B.L.P.P). The young Stalinists, at the behest of the executive committee of the Belgian Communist Party, "resigned" from the C.P.

In the United States also, the Young Communist League has increased its membership. In 1928 it had about 3,500 members; today it claims 10,000. Its influence, particularly among the lower middle class, through its work in the American Youth Congress and the YWCA and <sup>YWCA</sup> has undoubtedly increased. It is significant that its work in the New York settlement houses is meagre compared to several years ago; in the trade unions, its influence - apart from that of the Communist Party's - is likewise meagre. Its former anti-militarist work is now replaced by its virulent pro-war propaganda, which in its present form 1938 is less popular among the lower middle class youth than its propaganda of a year or two ago.

However, the growth of the Y.C.Ls still lags far behind the increase in membership and influence of the communist parties.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

Theses and Resolutions of the various Congresses of the Y.C.I. published in pamphlets in English but now unavailable (with the exception of the resolutions of the Sixth World Congress). The

The following is especially valuable and may be found in some reference libraries.

The International of Youth (organ of Y.C.I.) Sept. 1927

The Fundamental Problems of the Young Communist Movement  
(1922)

The Draft Programme of the Young Communist International  
(1924)

Program of the Young Communist International (1928)

Young Spartacus (organ of Spartacus Youth League) Dec. 1931-Dec. 1935.