

Progressives and Communists

The Character of the C. P. L. A. -- Left Wing and Progressives -- Two Dangers for Communists

by Ben Gitlow

The present economic crisis has severely shaken smug American optimism. People lack the confidence they once had. The end of capitalism's era of "permanent" prosperity has jarred their sense of security. There are signs that people are beginning to use their heads to think a little.

Bourgeois convictions of the prowess of American big business with its boastful cock-sureness has given way to questioning and doubting. Many are raising the question of where are we going and what we are headed for. Some learned bourgeois apologists are reading the handwriting on the wall and are frantically calling upon American capitalism to meet the challenge of Socialism, to provide economic security and to improve materially the conditions of the toiling masses, or else--be doomed.

The working class has surely not escaped the effects of the economic crisis. It has been the worst hit by the crisis. The labor movement is therefore bound to react to the changes in attitude caused by the crisis.

A PERIOD OF REVALUATION

We witness in the labor movement today a revaluation process going on. Policies and programs are being closely examined and the question is being asked: *What is the way out?* The answer to this question is causing a differentiation and schism in many organizations of the labor movement.

The fermentation which this is causing in the labor movement cannot be ignored by the Communists. Especially must we keep this in mind when we estimate the role of other organizations in the labor movement and our relations to them.

We cannot accept the official Communist Party's kindergarten analysis of all tendencies and movements in the labor movement. The official Communist Party leadership has such a simple analysis today that not the least exertion of brain energy is required. On the one side are the Communists--the "good boys"; on the other side, all others--the "bad boys", they are traitors, renegades, "social-fascists," fakery, etc. The trouble with such an analysis is that besides requiring no ability to think it also draws a line which divides the Communists from the masses. For a political organization that it suicide. Besides many who are not Communists today will be Communists tomorrow. Furthermore the overthrow of capitalism in the United States will be a mass event requiring the active participation of many more than just the Communist Party members.

With this in mind let us consider what the C.P.L.A. (Muste Movement) is and our relations to it as Communists.

WHAT IS THE C.P.L.A.?

The C.P.L.A. is not a trade union. It is not organized on the basis of a craft, trade or industry.

The C.P.L.A. is not an organization like the Trade Union Educational League. The T.U.E.L. was made up entirely of members of trade unions. The C.P.L.A. includes in its ranks as members all who accept its program regardless of whether they are trade unionists or even workers.

Its program is not confined strictly or even in the main to trade union questions.

It is a semi-political organization based largely upon individual membership regardless of industry and trade union affiliation, controlled by a center which is constituted without respect to the various industries and trade unions of the country. It is basically more of a political than a trade union organization. It also lacks the prerequisites of a left wing minority or trade union opposition movement.

To the extent that the C.P.L.A. has developed a program, it is different from the program of the Communists. Many features of the political program of the C.P.L.A. are even opposed to the program of the Communists. In the main, nevertheless its trade union program can be accepted by the Communists for the constitution of an opposition movement in the trade unions.

The C.P.L.A. has for one of its main objectives the building up of a progressive trade union movement. But it is not essentially a progressive trade union movement, tho it is very often accepted and considered as such. Within it it has the germs of a progressive trade union movement. It is, however, essentially a left Socialist development between Social-democracy and Communism. But even here, organizationally, the line of demarcation between the C.P.L.A. and Social-democracy is not so clear. Take the C.P.L.A. as an organization. It is made up of right wing Socialists, liberals, pseudo left wingers, left Socialists and progressives. All of these today finds a place in the organization and a freedom of action because of the indefiniteness of its political program and its lack of a mass rank and file base in the trade unions.

That is why Muste, Oneal, Thomas, Lefkowitz, Maurer, Salutsky and others could up till now rub shoulders in one organization without any outward sign of friction. The C.P.L.A. is a leftward development in the American labor movement tho it has many reactionary and right elements within it.

Because of its political program, because of its membership primarily of political leaders and trade union officials, and especially because it lacks and is not constituted of rank

and file trade union masses, the C.P.L.A. cannot itself become the left wing of the American trade unions.

C.P.L.A. AND COMMUNISTS

When Bert Miller reacts to the sectarian trade union line of the Communist Party leadership by being ready to abandon the Communist program and accept the program of the C.P.L.A. in preference to the Communist program and urges all to join the C.P.L.A. as now constituted as a genuine left wing trade union organization in the United States, he only rushes from one extreme to the other extreme. Those who follow him follow him out of the Communist ranks and out of our group.

We recognize that a differentiation has already started within the C.P.L.A. just as it has in the Socialist Party. This differentiation is bound, due to the conditions prevailing in the country and their effects upon the labor movement, to lead to the division

of the C.P.L.A. into its various elements causing definite recrystallization. The Communist program is not to join the C.P.L.A. but to unite on concrete issues with it for development of a progressive, a leftward movement in the trade unions based upon trade union masses. This will hasten the schism between the reactionaries and progressives, the left and right, in the C.P.L.A., and make possible a union of the left forces of the C.P.L.A. with the Communists in the building up of a left wing in the trade unions.

But the official Communist Party calls the Musteites social-fascists, etc. The official Communist Party's idiotic sectarian line on the one hand isolates the Communists and organizes the anti-Communist front and on the other hand causes a Bert Miller reaction that leads away from Communism.

Our position is neither. Ours is a Communist position making for unity and mass work.

A False Orientation in Negro Work

ARE THE U. S. NEGROES A NATION?

Error has its logic as well as truth! And sometimes the iron logic of error destroys itself. Thus the recent Resolution on the Negro Question in the United States, "confirmed by the Political Commission of the ECCP," (*The Communist*, Feb. 1931), carries the present fundamentally false orientation of the Communist Party upon the Negro question to such (strictly logical) absurdity that the essentially non-Marxian character of this orientation stands self-exposed.

WHAT IS THE NEGRO QUESTION?

There are three fundamental approaches possible to the Negro question in the U. S. A. Do the Negro masses in this country constitute: (1) a colony of American imperialism (like the Virgin Islands, for example); (2) a national minority within the United States; or (3) an oppressed race?

The first possibility obviously does not correspond to the facts since the regions populated by the Negroes in this country very clearly constitute an integral part of the national economy of the United States. The second approach is the basic point of view of the Comintern and of the Party today.

"The Negro question in the United States must be viewed . . . as the question of an oppressed nation."

In essence, therefore, the Negro question in the United States, according to the Comintern, is really identical with the problem of the Croats in Yugoslavia, the Germans in Hungary, etc.; that is, it is a question of a national minority.

Does this correspond with the facts? Do the American Negroes constitute a nation in the sense in which the Croats, Ukrainians, or Greeks do? We quote an "unimpeachable" authority, none other than Comrade Stalin himself, who writes quite well on this question:

"A nation," he says in his article, Marxism and the National Question, written in 1913, "is an historically developed, consolidated and enduring community of language, territory, economic life, psychic structure--which manifests itself in the community of culture."

Have the American Negroes a "community of language, territory, economic life, psychic structure" as distinct from the white people at all comparable in type (not merely in degree) to the distinctions between the Hungarian and the German, between the Great-Russian and the Ukrainian? To maintain such a position is possible only for those who know absolutely nothing of the situation of the Negro masses in this country.

THE "BLACK BELT"

The champions of the "national minority" theory realize the fatal weakness of their case and are reduced to the most absurd dodges to bolster it up. The first prerequisite for a nation is certainly a "community of territory" (even the most enthusiastic of the official theoreticians will not insist on a special "Negro language"). Here they appeal to the "Black Belt." What is this "Black Belt"? In the South there are about 200 contiguous counties in various states in which the Negroes constitute a majority of the population. In these counties there are about 3½ million Negroes (out of a total Negro population of the U. S. A. amounting to 12,000,000). These 200 counties are gathered together, by the official theoreticians (under the inspiration of John Pepper--see his pamphlet *American Negro Problems*), as the "Negro-land" of the "Negro nation" just as the Ukraine is the land of the Ukrainian nation, Ireland of the Irish nation, etc.

But of course it is clear that this is absurd. Quite apart from the fact that only 25% of the Negroes in the U. S. A. live in this "Negro-land," who will maintain that the "Black Belt" has any real economic, historical, or social unity--that it is very much more than a grouping of counties not basically different from those counties where the Negroes form, not the majority, but a very large section of the population? But the Comin-

tern Resolution on the Negro Question even goes further: it maintains that the "Black Belt" was once (when?) a political unity and that its political unity was deliberately destroyed by an artificial division into states!!!

"At the present time the Negro zone--precisely for the purpose of facilitating national oppression--is artificially split up and divided into a number of various states . . ."

Imagine a man, pretending to understand American problems, who insists that Alabama and Arkansas and Mississippi were deliberately created in order to divide (gerrymander!) the "Black Belt"! When the official theoreticians have to resort to such phantasies their case must be bad indeed!

THE QUESTION OF "SELF-DETERMINATION"

The conception of the Negro question as a national question leads directly to the formulation of the slogan of self-determination as the "main slogan of the Communist Party in the Black Belt." What does this right of "self-determination" mean?

" . . . It is necessary . . . to bring together into one governmental unit all districts of the South where the majority of the settled population consists of Negroes."

This "unit" should have the right of "determining for itself the relations between its country and other governments, especially the United States"--the "Black Belt" (the 200 "contiguous counties") is to have the right of secession from the United States! Then why not the secession of the "contiguous wards" in Harlem from the City of New York and from the United States? There is at least as much "community of territory, and economic life" in Harlem as in the "Black Belt."

But not only should we preach the right of the Black Belt to secession; the movement for separatism in the "Black Belt" is growing, and soon "the question of the independence of the Black belt will become a question of the day." No less!

SERIOUS CONSEQUENCES

All this nonsense may seem more absurdity--but it has serious consequences. It entirely removes the Marxist basis for the work of the Communist Party among the Negro masses; it makes effective work impossible. And the Resolution itself bears testimony to the falseness of the road pointed out by it:

1. The new course completely underestimates the significance of the Negro proletariat and of the tendencies in the direction of the proletarianization of the Negroes. Since the peasantry is the historical bearer of the national-revolutionary movement, and since the Negro question is a "national" question, the Negro peasantry (in the South) is therefore the fundamentally decisive section of the Negro population. Therefore, the struggle of the Negro workers in the North is to be subordinated to the "national-liberation" struggle in the South (See section 12 of Resolution and elsewhere), where there is a "rapid approach of a revolutionary crisis" (section 5) . . .

2. As a result of its fundamentally false estimation of the Negro question, the new course offers the strongest objective support to the reaction-

As we have repeatedly pointed out, the "Sunshine" movement is beginning to peter out. It is coming down with a violent bang, the repercussion of which will be costly. All the "favorable" trade statistics are now so exploded that their boomers and boosters are flying to cover. Steel ingot output, the larger for the month, still shows operations at less than 46% capacity and as compared with January of last year, already in the slump, was 1,312,884 tons less. For the first time, car loadings