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A Letter from America

Two items culled from the off-year election results tell the story of what has happened to the Socialist left in this country. After twelve consecutive terms in office the Socialist mayor of Bridgeport, Connecticut, Jasper McLevy, was defeated this November. The victor was a Democrat who charged in his campaign that the Socialist was "too conservative."

On New York's East side, which had sent a Socialist to congress many years ago, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Communist leader and respected veteran of half a century service to labour, received 710 votes in a councilmanic election. She was the only Communist candidate and the efforts of the entire party were concentrated on her campaign. The myopia behind the move to offer Gurley Flynn as a sacrifice in factional maneuvering is a sad story in itself, too dreary to relate.

There have been socialist organizations in America for over a century. At present socialism has disappeared as an organized force in this country- The Communist Party is moribund. But, like its predecessors - Socialist Labour Party, the Socialist Party, the IWW - it may never be interred. Radical organizations that have outlived their day in the U.S. have a way of staying around in a kind of frozen, sect-like status. This is not to suggest that the socialist tradition never meant much in our history. It did. There was a significant and useful Socialist party. The Communist Party also made a lasting contribution to the American scene. Right now, however, for any practical purposes, the Socialist and Communist parties have ceased to exist.

Neither the Socialist nor the Communist parties were ever mass parties, in the same sense as the French or Italian parties. Nevertheless, there were periods when they sparked the development of the labor movement and made an important mark on the political life of America. For the Socialists it was the Debs movement and the 1908-1918 decade. For the Communists it was the democratic-front movement and the 1935-1945 decade.

The high-water mark of direct socialist influence in this country came in 1912. That year the Socialist Party's membership reached 118,000. Debs received 900,000 votes for President. This was nearly 6% of the total, the largest percentage ever attained by a socialist party before or after. This was the era of Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson and reform. One motivating reason for this "era of

unusually progressive politics," says David A. Shannon, in his *History of the Socialist Party*, sponsored by the Fund for the Republic, was the influence of the Socialist Party.

American Communist Party membership reached 80,000 on the eve of World War II. Though the C.P. never got a significant vote in national elections Communists played a vital role in the organization of the mass production industries through the CIO. The historic struggle for Negro integration was started originally in Communist-inspired campaigns for the freedom of the Scottsboro boys and the Herndon case. Communists pioneered for social legislation later realized through the Roosevelt New Deal. In the depths of the depression the official labor movement leadership spurned the notion of unemployment insurance. It was then, as liberal historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., writes in his informative *Crisis of the Old Order*: "Unemployed Councils, set up by the Communist Party, agitated, often to good effort, for better conditions in relief centres, for the stopping of eviction, for unemployment insurance."

The Socialist Party was reduced to a sect during the '30s at a time when it refused to acknowledge anything progressive in the New Deal, or in collective security. The Communist Party, then espousing the politics of coalition, gained influence and became the main bearer of the radical tradition.

By the end of the war the C.P. had some 75,000 members and exercised leadership in left-wing unions with a membership of some 1,000,000. Now my guess is that the party is down to four or five thousand members. No-one will dispute its complete isolation from the trade unions. An official guess by party leaders places membership at the 8,000 figure. But this, they admit, is not based on registered or dues-payments. Even my guess of four or five thousand includes many who don't attend meetings or pay dues. And it's a sad sign of the demise of *all* socialist organizations that the present C.P. membership is larger than that of all other Socialist organizations and groups combined. The Socialist Party, which recently merged with a split-off of a right wing socialist group, the Social Democratic Federation, has a combined membership of about 1,500. This may be joined in turn by a few hundred adherents of a split-off from the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party. The latter also has a few hundred members. All these groups tend to compete with the C.P. for laurel as exponents of dogmatic sectarianism.

Most Communist Party members left the organization long before it was rocked by the Khrushchev revelations about Stalinist tyranny. Some 60,000 quit the party between 1945 and 1955. Another ten or twelve thousand left since then. It would hardly be fair to say that this disintegration was due solely to wrong policies and mistakes

of the party. The bulk left during the period of an unprecedented witch-hunt. To become known as a Communist, or as a Communist sympathizer, or often to be a blood relative of a Communist, meant loss of a job. But there were courageous men and women in the C.P. who stood up to this McCarthyism. Then they left the party when they saw it was no longer the vehicle for progress and socialism in our country. Of those who had remained in the party during the worst of the Smith Act and McCarran Act persecutions many left after the pall of McCarthyism began to lift and when the Supreme Court began to restore the Bill of Rights to a measure of legal existence.

Unquestionably the impact of the 20th Congress revelations about how Communism had degenerated under Stalin played a major part in the final disintegration of the party. But the C.P. had already been doomed. Its demise was of a piece with the decline and death of the Socialist Party, the Socialist Labor Party, the IWW. It wasn't, and couldn't have been persecution alone that wiped out the party. Other revolutionary organizations have survived equally severe persecution. But there was a special quality to the isolation of the C.P. from the American working class. It had to be experienced to be appreciated. A small incident reveals much about this isolation.

It occurred during the depths of the McCarthyite miasma. The city of New York, owner of the subway system, fired a janitor who had toiled more than a quarter of a century in the only underground he ever knew - the subway station. His daily task could hardly be called very sensitive. He cleaned the filthiest, most abused toilets in the city of New York. But the august power of the city of New York dismissed this worker because he had been a member of the Communist Party. He had also been a charter member of the Transport Workers Union. This union had a history of militancy. It was built originally largely on the initiative of the Communist Party in the 30s after all previous efforts to organize the municipal transport workers had failed. Most of its first leaders were Communists or Communist sympathizers. The rank-and-file workers, who numbered few communists among them, didn't fear the red label at all. They elected their left wing leaders again and again. Nevertheless, when the "subversive" janitor was fired, no one protested publicly. Not a peep was heard from the workers. Communism and communists had become anathema. The silence was more deafening than the world's noisiest subway.

The isolation of the C.P. was a foredoomed result of the reorganization of the party which followed the publication of the Duclos article in 1945 and the subsequent removal of Earl Browder as general secretary and his expulsion from the party. Whatever the faults of

Browder. and they cannot be denied, he had a remarkably clear insight about the possibility and significance of peaceful coexistence between the communist and capitalist states in the post-war world. This issue transcends all others in world politics in the atomic age. It was therefore a disservice to American communists and an early sign of disastrous changes in Stalin's foreign policy outlook when Duclos wrote in his April, 1945, article attacking Browder for declaring "in effect, that at Teheran capitalism and socialism had begun to find the means of peaceful coexistence and collaboration in the framework of one and the same world . . ."

A measure of how Stalinism distorted Marxist concepts came in the second instance of Duclos' meddling in the affairs of the American Communist party. In his letter to the last national convention of the C.P. Duclos wrote that proletarian internationalism "implies solidarity with the foreign policy of the Soviet Union." This caricature of Marxism was offered nearly four years after Stalin died. It was the kind of subservience which prevented the C.P. from supporting the anti-Hitler war in 1939, and which had resulted in apologetics for the Moscow trials, the Rajk, Rostov and Slansky frame-ups, the destruction of Jewish culture in the Soviet Union, the campaign against Yugoslavia and in an earlier period the awful theory of social fascism and rejection of a united front against fascism.

Duclos' second letter was too much even for the C.P. convention which voted down the efforts of the diehards to sanction the Duclos ukase. The convention rejected the line of the Duclos letter. Unfortunately it lacked the courage to issue a forthright repudiation of the Duclos views, and specifically of the concept quoted above. The American Communist Party went further than any other Communist party in rejecting Stalinism. And even after "greetings" from John Williamson from London had inferred the "necessity" of re-electing Foster as chairman and Eugene Dennis as general secretary, the convention voted against that too. It elected no officers and decided in favour of committee leadership.

But this was all too little and too late. The latest crisis in the affairs of the C.P. was but a climax to a long process of disintegration. And this was linked to the general setting within which all socialist organizations have declined in America.

The two periods of relative success for socialist movements - 1908-1918 and 1935-1945 - were both marked by a minimum of dogmatism and a maximum of application to the specific American scene. The socialists of the earlier decade had room for a right wing, a left wing and a center, for Christian socialists and populists, for workers, for middle class members and intellectuals. The communists of the later decade had room for militant New Dealers as well as orthodox

Marxists and they began to grope towards the concept of a coalition path to socialism as well as to reforms.

Still, the promise of both decades was never realized. In both parties dogma triumphed over reality ultimately. No socialist movement in America ever persisted in a search for what Engels called the "singular road" that Americans would travel to socialism. Engels added it would be "an almost insane road," in his letter to Sorge written from London, Sept. 16, 1886. It would appear insane, assuredly, to those who substituted the letter of Marxism for its method. An application of its method would start from the facts - the facts of America's economy, the facts of American democratic tradition, the facts of American productive development in the epoch of imperialism and of a new technological revolution with the splitting of the atom, the facts of how American labour exercised political pressure through the old corrupt capitalist parties, the facts of a higher standard of living than that of workers anywhere, facts which contradicted notions of increasing poverty, facts of the welfare state attained under the Roosevelt New Deal, the paradoxical facts of continuing monopoly control and the increasing influence of organized labour, the facts of a rising tide in the struggle for Negro integration and lots more.

It would not be a disparagement of Marxism to agree with Engels' letter to Sorge from London (Sept. 16, 1887): "that the Americans, for the time being, will learn almost exclusively from practice and not so much from theory." What prophetic insight Engels had about the British and the Americans when he wrote from London to Schlueter (Jan. 11, 1890): "The American workers are coming along all right, but just like the English they go their own way. One cannot drum theory into them beforehand, but their own experience and their own blunders and the resulting evil consequences will bump their noses up against theory - and then all right. Independent peoples go their own way, and the English and their offspring are surely the most independent of them all."

The founders of new socialist movements in America should be willing to realize that American workers have come along pretty well so far. They have won the highest standard of living of workers anywhere. And their "stiff-necked" and obstinate British cousins came along pretty well when they built a powerful independent Labor party which includes a vital left wing. Perhaps American socialists can learn some lessons from the life of Britain's Keir Hardy. A useful article by G. D. H. Cole on Keir Hardy appears in "The American Socialist." Cole notes that Hardie "made it easy for men and women to transfer their allegiance from liberalism to socialism without too sharp a break in their ways of thought and action." If

American workers are to exercise more independent political action their present allegiance to the Democratic Party is a factor to be reckoned with. Cole also points out that Hardie "gave priority to support of trade union action and to political pressure for improved conditions under capitalism, which could be displaced only at a later stage and could in his view in the meantime easily afford to grant improved standards of living to the bottom dogs." The experience of the American labour movement seems to tally with that kind of approach.

Nor does such seeming moderation require de-emphasis on socialism. When Samuel Gompers still had some socialist ideas he expressed a thought which appeared to enshrine reformism but which contains more than a hint of the relationship between reform and revolution. Gompers said in 1890 : "*The way out of the wage system is through higher wages.*" What has marked the past efforts of socialists and communists in America is the failure to win any appreciable number of workers for socialism. Perhaps a closer study of the relationship between increasing welfare, increasing power for labour, increasing wages and social benefits — and problems of public ownership and control will ultimately yield more fruitful results for socialist theory in this country than the orthodox studies of the past. It requires enormous pressure and struggle for workers merely to maintain their relative share of the national product. Perhaps an effort which increases this share can shake the foundations of private monopoly power. In any case a new socialist movement will have to develop out of the ranks of labour and its struggles. It will have to be immersed in that labour movement.

If Soviet socialism has never been a model for spurring American socialism there is a way in which the Soviet Union will unquestionably influence the course of American politics. Those sputniks up in space have already done far more than all the Comintern cables and Duclos letters of the last 40 years. Even official demands for integrating American schools have been voiced out of fear of what "Soviet propagandists" will say if we segregate our coloured children. Peaceful competition between the Soviet Union and the United States may be the condition out of which American socialism will become a necessity. How else carry out a still greater advance in science, improve living standards, integrate the races, overcome the Russians in training engineers, beat them in things that count - science, education, health, social welfare, and maintain leadership in per capita production? How prevent the Soviet Union from overtaking and surpassing us in all the material things and also in the things of the spirit and in freedom above all - except through democratic socialism?

In the recent period there have been faint glimmerings of a new kind of search for that "singular road" to socialism. The ferment and discussion that came with the revolt against Stalinism within the C.P. has encouraged and given new life to publications such as ("The American Socialist" and "The Monthly Review." I. F. Stone's Weekly is crusading in the spirit of American radicalism. A recent book *American Radicals* reveals a surprising number of radical and socialist teachers in the colleges and the book itself does some useful digging into the American radical tradition. The American Forum for Socialist Education headed by A. J. Muste has sparked some lively discussions and so has the Committee for Socialist Unity. These are still tiny manifestations against the background of a labour movement in which socialism as such plays no part today. We have lived in the pre-history of the American socialist movement.

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