
PANACEA MASS MOVEMENTS

A PROBLEM IN BUILDING THE DEMOCRATIC FRONT

BY WILLIAM Z. FOSTER

[In the first article, printed in the November issue, Comrade Foster developed an analysis of the Technocracy, Epic, Utopian, Townsend, Huey Long, and Coughlin panacea movements. He gave a short history of these movements: their rise, spread and decline; together with an analysis of their programs, their social composition, and the relation they bore to other mass movements and to the fascist danger. The following article applies these lessons to the struggle of today.—The Editors.]

PART II

THE PRESENT SITUATION

AS WE have seen, the heyday of technocracy. Epic, utopian, share-the-weath and similar panacea mass movements was during the crisis period, 1932-36. After the latter year they receded as a general phenomenon; but it would be a grave blunder to conclude therefrom that they and the fascist danger that is linked with them have definitely died out. On the contrary, the objective and subjective conditions for their growth still exist in most pronounced form, and we may expect to face their reappearance in new and still more dangerous forms.

First, because big capital, increasingly fascist-minded, has more and more recourse to demagogy in order to hold the masses under its exploitation, and therefore, may be depended upon to leave no stone unturned to do all possible to initiate organizations operating by reactionary demagogy and to seize control of such movements when they spring up spontaneously.

Secondly, the prolongation of the industrial crisis, by continuing the grievances of the masses, makes them susceptible to demagogy. There are 12,000,000 unemployed; great masses of workers and farmers are living in abject poverty, and the city middle class is also being impoverished; the menace of fascism and war hangs over the country. The Roosevelt administration and the trade unions have brought considerable relief to the oppressed masses; but this is quite inadequate. The people's grievances, in the increasing breakdown of capitalism, are many and urgent. This makes the masses prone to believe the panaceas of demagogues of every stripe, which are stimulated and urged on by reactionary finance capital. And as Dimitroff stated at the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International, the demagogy of these

reactionaries "in its stupidity frequently reached the point of lunacy."

Thirdly, the masses are further subject to demagogic infection because the great bulk of them still remain unorganized—politically, industrially and culturally. The growth of the New Deal forces of the trade unions, of the youth movement, and of other constructive democratic organizations during the past several years has done much to unite, educate and discipline the masses and thus to immunize them against fascist demagogy; but vast numbers of them are still unorganized and therefore partially or wholly exposed. And let us not forget that, even in a country that had such big trade unions and workers' political parties as Germany, the fascist demagogues still found many millions of impoverished people to dupe.

Fourthly, the danger of demagogic mass contagion is also great because of the fact that there are already at hand many reactionary, boss-financed organizations, whose meat and drink are demagogy and who are eager to seize upon every mass illusion for their own purposes. Of these there are the more definitely fascist organizations—the Silver Shirts, Black Legion, Ku-Klux Klan, Khaki Shirts, Vigilantes, Crusaders, German-American Bund, and many others. There is also the LaFollette National Progressives of America with its semi-swastika emblem and raw, demagogic appeal—a grouping that is a potential danger to progress in the 1940 elections.

There are in addition the remnants of the many panacea mass movements which form the subject of this article and which are all striving militantly to grow. The vitality of this third

type of movement is evidenced by the recent recrudescence of the Townsend movement in many states, and especially by the meteoric rise of the \$30-every-Thursday Old-Age Pension Plan movement in California and other states. The latter movement is a classic specimen of its type, with a burning popular issue and honest mass support, petty-bourgeois leadership, impractical program, ultra-rapid growth, lack of trade union support, etc.

It was nevertheless strong enough to induce almost one-third of all the registered voters of California to sign a petition to put its pension plan on the ballot for the November elections. Finally and most sinister of all these forces is the Republican Party. This party, the party of big capital, has definitely embarked upon a policy of rank demagogy, which we Communists have summed up as an attempt to cover its reactionary face with a progressive mask. In the recent election campaign, Hitler-like, it promised everything to everybody, and its standard bearers did not hesitate to endorse the Townsend Plan or any panacea movement if they thought it would catch votes and help them to office. They promised the most contradictory things: higher profits for the businessmen and lower living costs for the workers, greater crops and higher prices for the farmers, more government expenditures, lower taxes and a balanced federal budget, etc.

THE DEMOCRATIC FRONT

All these facts—the presence of burning grievances among the toilers, their unorganized and politically uneducated condition, and the existence

of many sprouting fascist or near-fascist organizations show the possibilities for the growth of such types of confused mass movements as Epic, Technocracy, Share-the-Wealth, and Townsend. They constitute a real problem. There will be more of them and whether they (the new California Pension Plan, for example) develop into instruments of reaction or become constructive sections in the growing democratic front will depend basically upon the policies of the progressive forces.

The democratic front is the effective answer to the danger from demagogic mass movements, whether of the Share-the-Wealth-Townsend-Technocracy type, the Progressive and Republican Party varieties, or those of more openly fascist character. The building up of the mass organizations of the workers, farmers and lower petty bourgeoisie, and their linkage on the basis of a practical program of demands in a militant alliance against the forces of reaction is the only guarantee against the menace of demagoguery. The democratic front not alone mobilizes the masses for struggle against fascism, incipient and full-blown, but also, in the measure that it is built up and functions effectively and that the proletariat exercises hegemony in it, immunizes them against the many forms of capitalist demagoguery. The Longs, Coughlins, Hearsts, MacFaddens, Townsends & Co. will shout in vain at masses that are organized in or under the influence of a strong democratic front.

SOME CONCRETE TASKS

In building the democratic front,

especially with regard to combatting demagoguery, there are a maze of tasks to be carried out. In this article I shall indicate only a few of key importance.

a. *Express the national traditions and aspirations of the people:* Every fascist and semi-fascist demagogue, to carry out his reactionary purposes, seeks to pose as the spokesman of the people's traditions and hopes; aims to wrap himself about with a mantle of ultra-patriotism. How disastrous it is when such people capture the national catchwords is all too clearly illustrated by Hitler and Mussolini. The Communist Party is acutely alive to this danger and is identifying itself completely with the true Americanism of the people. The growing democratic front must also become more conscious of this necessary work. Far more than at present, the democratic front, in all its varied manifestations, must come forward militantly as the inheritor and continuer of the people's democratic struggles. Roosevelt does this to a considerable extent with the New Deal, and the whole democratic front movement must do it more and more. It must more effectively link up its structure, campaigns, programs and perspectives with the historic mass movements and aspirations of the workers, farmers and petty bourgeoisie, dating back to the colonization of this country, and even earlier. It must proceed militantly on the basis that the democratic front is the Americanism of today, and represents all that is healthy and progressive in American history and present-day life. This identification of the democratic front with the people's Americanism will raise strong ideolog-

ical barriers in the way of capitalist demagogy of every kind.

b. *Satisfy the burning demands of the masses:* If the democratic front is to prove an effective dike against fascist and incipient fascist demagogy it must also be able to meet the urgent needs of the workers, farmers, professionals, etc., more effectively than the New Deal has done up to date. It is true that the Roosevelt administration has brought the masses many concessions, including considerable unemployment relief and work, a measure of farm relief, the legal right of trade union organization, the elements of a program of social security, the beginnings of minimum wages and bonus, some guarantees of civil rights, a little protection for small home-owners and bank depositors, etc.

But all this is only a start. The people, as we have seen, are still harassed by the most serious hardships, and until these are lessened the masses will be exposed to fascist and semi-fascist demagogy. As the Communist Party constantly points out, the masses urgently need "Jobs, Security, Democracy and Peace." The Party advocates a whole series of practical measures to accomplish this end. These include the smashing of the monopoly high price rings, the initiation of a five-billion-dollar housing program, the rehabilitation and nationalization of the railroads, a great increase in W.P.A., and direct relief, more protection for the farmers, the launching of a great national health program, the nationalization of the banks and munition plants, the development of a big program to protect the youth, extension of the rights of the Negroes, insistence upon an embargo against

Germany and Japan, full support of the invaded Chinese, Spanish, Ethiopian, Austrian and Czechoslovakian peoples, and the development of a policy of concerted peace action by the democratic peoples of the world to restrain the fascist aggressors, etc., etc.

For the adoption of these measures, the only sure guarantee against the growth of fascist demagogy, the main task is not to bring pressure to bear against Roosevelt (although that is necessary also), but solidly to organize all the divisions of the democratic front—workers, farmers, middle class—and to direct their irresistible power—political, industrial, cultural—against the big reactionary capitalist forces that are preventing the realization of even Roosevelt's modest program of reform and that constitute the breeding nest of the fascist danger in all its forms, not the least of which is the confused mass movements that are our theme.

c. *Clarify the Farmer-Labor Party question:* An important task in connection with directing the masses in such movements as the Epic, Share-the-Wealth, Townsend, California Pension Plan, etc., into constructive democratic front channels is to clarify the question of the third party. Often the panacea movements set up independent tickets and parties in an arbitrary way that seriously splits the growing solidarity of the toilers and plays directly into the hands of reaction. The demagogues make wide use of the third party slogan. The most striking example of this was the Lemke presidential candidacy in 1936, set up by the Coughlin, Long and Townsend movements. Nationally, there now exists the LaFollette Pro-

gressive Party, and in California there are two such movements, both very dangerous, the Townsend Party and the Progressive Party. And we may look for further similar developments in the future in various states.

Such third party movements acquire great force from the facts that the masses are in growing revolt against reactionary leadership in the two old parties and that for many years Communists, Socialists and progressives have been militantly urging the formation of a separate Farmer-Labor Party. Demagogues of the Coughlin, Townsend, Lemke type take advantage of this situation and set up their splitting third parties. Now the mass desire to build a great party of workers, farmers and lower middle class elements is a sound one; but it is a task that has to be gone at with skill and intelligence. Experience has taught us that the offhand launching of third party movements, even when it is done with the best of intentions, can be highly destructive to the solidarity of the masses and their chances for victory.

The building of the broad party of toilers that we, in tune with the most advanced elements of the workers, are aiming at, is following two broad, converging lines of development. First and most important at this time is the growth of the progressive wing within the Democratic Party (and to a lesser extent also in the Republican Party). Whether this movement will eventually lead to the transformation of the Democratic Party (or most of it) into a liberal party, into an approximation of a Farmer-Labor Party with or without that name, or whether it will culminate in a great split and

the formation of a new party is problematical and not a question of immediate concern. The second path to the realization of the eventual mass party of toilers is through such organizations as the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party, the Wisconsin Progressive Party, the American Labor Party of New York, Labor's Non-Partisan League, etc., which follow varying degrees of independent activity and organization.

Unity of action of all the toilers in one broad democratic front, here and now, is the very essence of our strategy against the forces of reaction; hence it is of basic importance that both the foregoing streams making towards the eventual formation of a great party of the masses be dovetailed together and developed as two closely related phases of one general process. Consequently, when new parties are established or independent candidacies launched such action must be undertaken always with careful regard to its effect upon the struggle of the New Deal progressives inside the Democratic Party. Otherwise the mass forces will be split and disaster can result. The question, therefore, is not one of giving up the Farmer-Labor Party slogan, but of teaching the masses the course of strategy by which this historically correct slogan must be realized. It would be a grave error to surrender the Farmer-Labor Party slogan to the demagogues—the Lovestoneites, Trotskyites, Coughlinites, Townsendites, LaFollettes, etc., who are so eager to misuse it.

d. *Establish cooperative relations with the panacea mass movements:* A further vital consideration in incorporating such movements as Epic,

California Pension Plan, Share-the-Wealth, etc., into the nascent democratic front is to set up friendly working relations with the masses in these movements, to participate thoroughly in them. We must never forget that these masses have legitimate grievances and are fighting to satisfy them—even though in many cases their leaders are corrupt and fascist-minded demagogues. We must learn to work with such masses even while fighting their reactionary leaders. We must also understand how, while explaining the fallacies of their often fantastic panaceas, to show the masses that the democratic front and its realistic program offer the most practical means to accomplish the end they have in mind, and to convince them that any connection with reactionary candidates and parties is disastrous. Already our Party has had considerable success in this general direction, not the least of which is our present-day good working relations with the California Pension Plan movement.

e. Develop the perspective of the masses: Traditionally the perspective of the huge bulk of the toiling masses in this country has not transcended the capitalist orbit. That is, they have hoped and planned to solve their urgent daily economic problems—to secure jobs, to raise their living standards, to educate their children, to provide for the inevitable “rainy days,” etc.—within the framework of the capitalist system. They have had no socialist perspective, but have been basically influenced in developing their general social outlook by capitalist illusions.

Such illusions among the masses, fostered by various misleaders,

reached their apex during the Coolidge “prosperity” period. The mass perspective at that time foresaw very positively a rapid growth of the toilers’ well-being under capitalism. But the great 1929 crisis, with its terrific industrial breakdown, wholesale unemployment, widespread starvation, and general decline in living standards, gave this rosy dream a rude shock. Huge numbers had their faith in the capitalist system confused and weakened, and this showed itself, as we have seen, by the growth of broad demands for a “new social order,” for a society based on “production for use,” much vague talk about a coming “revolution,” and by the springing up of many panaceas whose implications would require profound modifications of the capitalist system. The New Deal, with its program of reform, has partially restored the masses’ faith in their ability to defend themselves even under the capitalist system; but its inability to overcome the industrial crisis and the prevalent consequent widespread mass pauperization has not eliminated the aspirations, though still confused, from the minds of huge numbers of people that somehow or other the capitalist system will have to be basically modified or even abolished before they can achieve the well-being they so ardently desire.

Needless to emphasize, this confusion in the mass ideology, unless corrected, presents a big opening for fascist and semi-fascist demagogues of all stripes to give the people harmful and reactionary outlooks and programs. Let us not forget that Hitler and Mussolini rode into power exploiting vague revolutionary sentiments among

the backward masses, and also that the Coughlins and Longs showed themselves expert in utilizing such confused mass sentiments in this country. Thus, the clarifying and strengthening of the mass perspective becomes of major importance for the present-day success of the democratic front and also ultimately for our program of socialism.

The first steps in this task are to teach the masses, by effective mass struggle as well as by the spoken and written word, the possibilities possessed by the people, united in a great democratic front, to alleviate many of their current burning mass grievances even within the framework of the decaying capitalist system. This does not mean re-awakening capitalist illusions among them, but teaching them their own power under present-day circumstances. A democratic front government in the United States, supported by powerful trade unions, farm organizations, and strong political and cultural organizations, can, through militant struggle, weaken the main forces of the enemy, finance capital, in many of its key positions by securing immediate control of the government apparatus and the armed forces, by taking active steps to break the sit-down strike of big capital and to expand production, by nationalizing various trustified industries such as banking, railroad and munitions, by cracking down upon monopolistic practices, etc. A democratic front government can substantially protect the living standards of the workers, farmers and professionals, shield their civil rights against resurgent reaction and fascism, provide a broad system of social insurance, and, in coopera-

tion with other democratic peoples, help stave off war. It can set up a new and freer form of democracy than capitalism has ever known and thus create more favorable conditions for the people's advance to socialism.

But, while building the confidence of the masses in the power of the democratic front to protect their interests within the framework of capitalism, we must at the same time guard them against capitalist illusions. We must insistently teach them that the present social order is incurably in decay and that only by the abolition of the capitalist system and the establishment of socialism can the people basically solve the great social problems of hunger, insecurity, industrial crises, fascism and war that confront them; that only through socialism can they open the way to an expanding prosperity, freedom, culture and peace. In all this educational work the popularization of the socialist achievements of the U.S.S.R. is of fundamental importance.

To cultivate a mass socialist perspective is doubly urgent at the present time, because the toilers in this country, as in the rest of the capitalist world, are confused by the kaleidoscopic course of events. Their old-time perspectives are breaking down with the collapse of the capitalist system and they are preyed upon by all stripes of confusionist, fascist and Trotskyite demagogues, who offer them reactionary utopias and panaceas. It therefore becomes of prime necessity that the broadest possible masses be taught the Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist analysis of world events and their ultimate socialist solution.

TASKS OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY

In dealing with the problem of such panacea mass movements as Technocracy, Epic, Townsend, Share-the-Wealth, Utopians, California Pension Plan, etc., as well as demagogic movements of openly reactionary or fascist character, an especially heavy responsibility falls upon the Communist Party. The task of winning the masses in such movements for constructive struggle is a central one in building the democratic front. And its successful accomplishment calls for the exercise of every one of our Party's qualities as the vanguard of the working class.

Our Party has need to exert all its Marxian training to analyze and skillfully explain to the masses the theoretical complexities of the otherwise bewildering situation that is arising with the decay of capitalism; it must teach the masses to wrest the national slogans from the hands of reactionary demagogues; it must valiantly struggle to achieve the unsatisfied immediate demands of the masses for jobs, security, democracy and peace and prevent their being exploited by demagogues; it must know how successfully to combine the fight for the Farmer-Labor Party with present-day necessities in building the democratic

front; it must understand the way to cooperate with panacea mass movements while pointing out their fallacies and combatting their often unreliable leaders; it must know how to show the masses the extent to which they can defend their interests under capitalism while at the same time educating them to the inevitable necessity for socialism; it must be able to protect the revolutionary slogans from misuse by Trotskyites, Lovestoneites and spurious, "Left" Socialists.

All of which big tasks emphasize afresh the necessity for building our Party. As never before, we must push on with the recruitment of its forces by the inclusion of the large numbers of workers—fighters who are literally standing at its doors. And especially must we pay urgent attention to the Bolshevik training of our members and contacts. In these days, with complex problems and desperate struggles growing everywhere, with fascist demagoguery sprouting rankly on all sides, with fascist capitalism frantically striving to crush out all democracy and socialism, the question of speedily developing a great body of clear-thinking Communist thinkers and fighters becomes of decisive importance.