

CPA Discussion Page

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Communist Leadership

By ELIZABETH GURLEY FLYNN

In the current discussion of the very serious political errors we are now well aware we made in the past period, American Communists search their publications, official documents, and their own minds as to how they could possibly have made such serious political mistakes. Each one has an answer or several. All together they form an approximate estimate for emotions, exaggerations, and the varied tempo and scope of our individual reading and thinking. But it will actually take us a long time and a great deal more searching to plumb the depths of our "notorious revision of Marxism." We must explain it to ourselves. It cannot remain a mystery in the realm of mental aberrations. Explanations are no excuses. We must know what we did and why we did it, to guarantee that there will be no repetitions.

This involves also a discussion of leadership and whether replacements are in order.

Frankly I think some of our members, and leaders too, are going off the deep end here in some respects; as if we or any other Communist Party had never made any errors previously or as if there were no clearly defined Leninist practices in respect to errors and their corrections. Lenin's works are full of polemics against theoretical errors. That's how the Bolsheviks reached correct policies.

Self-criticism does not require excessive humility or self flagellation in a personal sense, as a prelude to political "hari-kari." We can take for granted that all the responsible leadership of our organization do feel the deepest grief and shame that these things could have happened and are ready to do everything to make corrections. To assume that leaders should be infallible, incapable of errors—is nonsense. Lenin said: "It is not the one who makes no mistakes who is wise. There are no such men nor can there be. He is wise who makes not very important mistakes and knows how to rectify them easily and quickly." Granted we are not yet wise in the Leninist sense, but we are certainly struggling to become so today. In criticizing others Lenin once said, "Let no active worker take offense at these frank remarks, for as far as insufficient training is concerned, I apply them first and foremost to myself."

The present all-over task of our leadership and membership is to put our American Communist organization on the right path. Wholesale elimination of leadership is neither necessary nor desirable. There will undoubtedly be a few exceptions, due to incapacity, lack of understanding, inability to readjust, or final disagreement. Wholesale sweeping out of leaders, to my mind, would be folly under the circumstances. If there had been an appreciable minority even, who had agreed with Comrade Foster in January, 1944, that core could logically be the center now of a changed leadership. But unfortunately hindsight is better than foresight was, with all of us.

Some now make claims to agreement with Foster in their secret recesses, but since we are not mind readers, we can only judge by their words and actions at the time. We are all in the same boat as far as our blindness to Comrade Foster's views was concerned. And this goes for many of our trade union comrades too. Those of them who added their judgment against Foster at that time cannot evade nor escape their full share of responsibility today. I mean union leaders, who would naturally be members of our National Committee, to whom we turn for advice and who carry

enormous prestige and influence with all of us.

Our collective duty is to get our ship back on its charted course, with as few fatalities as possible. The captain may jump overboard (at present he remains in his cabin and his intentions are obscure), but should we demand the crew jump overboard, too? The captain is determined apparently to follow the old course even if he goes alone. The crew are agreed it is not the right one. Before removing the crew we'd better be certain we have others ready and equipped to take their places and to face the stormy seas ahead. Comrade Foster has warned repeatedly of "over reaction." I am sure he refers to this as well as to sectarianism, etc. His warnings must be heeded. Our changes must be deliberate and constructive, not hasty and punitive.

No one of us, as an individual, is absolutely indispensable or irreplaceable. Death demonstrates this finality. But dealing with leaders, who are trained and experienced, it is wisdom to hold on to them. Bolshevik leaders are not made overnight, and that which takes years to attain cannot be lightly discarded. It's easy enough to cry "off with their heads" in Alice-in-Wonderland style, but heads do not fly in a seasoned Communist organization until all other methods have failed.

Sharpness of political criticism does not mean to take an axe to our own organization. Lenin's method was to destroy the errors but save the comrade, if at all possible. I believe the usefulness of our leaders, by and large, especially the younger ones, will be increased, not diminished, by the discussions and self criticism, we are now having. While we resolutely and continuously draw a new younger group

into leadership, and young it should be, though not elected for youth alone, we should just as resolutely preserve and continue all that is sound and valuable in our older seasoned and trained leaders of many years standing, though no one should be continued just because they are a veteran, either. This is the Leninist concept of "professional revolutionaries." And rather than to propose that they should be sent into industry, Lenin advocated taking a promising and talented working-class agitator and of long hours in the shop to place him at the service of the Party, and to assist and train him.

Some of the leftist concepts springing up in our discussion today were thoroughly thrashed out and discarded by Lenin years ago, such an anarchistic "rank and fileism." He insists that it is demagogic and a "demagogue is the worst enemy of the working class." He adds "One may become a demagogue out of sheer political innocence." It would be well for all of us to refresh ourselves at the fount of Lenin's writings on leadership. In the later period of our work such important matters were not emphasized sufficiently and many new comrades have no real concept of the special training of Communist leaders.

One of the best pamphlets for comrades to read today is "Mastering Bolshevism," a speech made by Joseph Stalin in 1937, during the most critical struggles against Trotskyite conspiracies. It is a model of Communist criticism, in which he emphasizes that "people are tempered in this struggle and emerge from the struggle really granite Bolsheviks." That "the open recognition of our mistakes and their honest rectification can on the contrary only strengthen our party and raise its authority among the

workers," was his reply to those who feared the party would lose prestige by admitting errors and weaknesses. He required of the C.P.S.U. at that time "readiness to liquidate our own carelessness, our own complacency, our own political shortsightedness." He was confident it could be done "in a real fashion, in a Bolshevik fashion."

We must be equally confident it can be done here, by all good Communists together. Mistakes will not be corrected overnight, by discussion alone, but by arriving at correct conclusions and proving them in work, in struggle, in carrying out our program fearlessly and checking on ourselves constantly.

Stalin has this to say in his "Foundations of Leninism" of discipline: a much misunderstood word: "Of course this does not exclude the possibility of conflict arising within the ranks of the Party. Quite otherwise... But when a difference of opinion has been thoroughly thrashed out, when criticism has had its say, and when a decision has been made, then unity of will and of action on the part of all of our members is the indispensable condition without which unity and discipline are impossible." Which is true of all Communist Parties, our own included, and must be our guide in the days ahead.

No member or leader is bigger than, or independent of, the organization once a decision is made. It does not mean to become a "Zombie" to accept the decision of your organization and carry it out even if you do not fully agree. To assert your independence right to express your own views, and to act accordingly, after a decision is made, is to act as an individualist in an anarchistic manner, and without regard for either democratic procedure or Communist discipline.

When Comrade Browder, in his speech before the Workers' School on Nov. 19, 1943, declared that the Negro people had exercised their right to self-determination by deciding to integrate themselves in the American nation a programmatic change was made by our party.

I assumed that a question of such magnitude was thoroughly discussed by the National Committee, and that this statement on the part of Browder would be supplemented by further information and data to show why the change has been made. I felt that this change could be made only if fundamental changes had taken place in the Black Belt. I thought that perhaps the Southern Bourbons had succeeded in dispersing the Negro people of the Black Belt in such a manner that the characteristic of a common territory had been lost and, therefore, the Negro people of the Black Belt no longer constituted an oppressed nation. Such articles and explanations never came and, on the basis of some remarks in Comrade Ford's article, it would seem such changes did not take place in the Black Belt and the Negro people continue to constitute an oppressed nation in the South.

This being so, our position that the Negro people have exercised their right of self-determination by deciding "to choose the path of integration of the Negroes into the whole American nation as one united nation" is wrong. This would mean that the Negro nation decided, of its own accord, to disperse itself and become completely assimilated with the American nation. This assertion runs counter to all other national liberation struggles of

smaller and weaker nations than the Negro nation.

It is true that those elements of the bourgeoisie of the oppressed nation who serve the oppressing nation have often advocated this solution of the national problem. This is evidenced, for example, in the attempt of the Czech bourgeoisie and elements of the Slovak bourgeoisie to convince the Slovak nation that it really is not a nation, but a branch of the Czech nation, and that the solution of its problems lies in integration. The Slovak nation never accepted this advice, and the Communists in Slovakia fought against this attempt to disperse and assimilate the Slovak nation.

Even if the Negro people of the Black Belt had decided, as Browder asserts, to integrate themselves into the whole American nation, the question arises whether the Communists should have supported this "solution" of the Negro question.

If there were such tendencies among the Negro people of the Black Belt, we could have referred them to the Leninist truth that "just as mankind can achieve the abolition of classes only through passing through the transition period of the dictatorship of the oppressed class, so mankind can achieve the inevitable mergings of nations only by passing through the transition period of complete liberation of all the oppressed nations—i.e., their freedom to secede." (Selected Works, Vol. 5, p. 271.)

Just as we spread very dangerous illusions about the possibilities of American capitalism to solve the economic problems of the American people, so we spread dangerous illusions about the possibilities of American imperialism to solve the

problems of the Negro people as a nation. We mistook the adoption of democratic reforms for the solution of the national question. And even these democratic reforms were of a limited and temporary character as shown by the great struggle now taking place for the continuation of the FEPC. But Jimcrowsism was not abolished, nor the polltax, nor the semi-feudal system of the South. Our reliance on the bourgeoisie to solve the national question certainly weakened our struggle for these democratic reforms, as Comrade Ford pointed out. But had all these measures been carried out, we yet would not have solved the Negro question as a national question.

If we had remembered this lesson we could not have dissolved our party in the South, which was the only effective force to lead and build the national liberation struggle of the Negro people in the South. We have not yet been told how the National Board and the National Committee arrived at the decision to dissolve the party in the South. However, if we are to learn anything from the experience of the European parties, we must conclude that by dissolving the party in the South we did incredible harm to the national liberation struggle of the Negro nation.

Within the movement for the liberation of the Czechoslovak Republic there was also a vigorous movement on the part of the Slovak and Carpatho-Ukrainian peoples to achieve complete freedom and self-government within the new liberated Czechoslovak Republic. The liberation struggle of the Slovak and Carpatho-Ukrainian people, in which the Communists were the most active workers, fought to

establish the guarantees that the Czech bourgeoisie would not again use its dominant position in the state to oppress these two peoples.

The Communists of Slovenia, Croatia, Macedonia and other countries conducted themselves in a similar way. It was only in this way that the oppressed nations of Europe—who were oppressed before Hitler's invasion as well as after Hitler conquered their countries—were fully mobilized for the fight against Hitler fascism.

By our revision of Marxism as it pertains to the national question, we weakened the whole struggle for emancipation of the Negro people. And yet there has not been a single article or statement on the part of the members of the National Board or the National Committee which would in a self-critical way explain how it was possible to make this mistake. The amended resolution does not mention this aspect of our revisionism. We cannot overcome the mistake we made if we fail to examine every facet of our past policies—including the national question.

H. V. SAUNDERS.
Pittsburgh.

Warns Against Dogmatism in Discussion

After reading the Duclos article, the Resolution and most of the resultant discussion, I'd like to register some of my first reactions to the debate.

The statement that "Marxism is a guide to action, not dogma," is often used to express the flexibility of the dialectical materialist school of thought. Yet in most of the criticism being leveled against Browder I detect, instead of a flexible use of scientific principles, the same dogmatism that we preach against.

We're all coming to realize that our main fault has been to lose sight of the class base of our society. In an analysis of a new world of co-existing capitalist and socialist sectors, allied in a struggle against fascism, we "over-analyzed" the situation and came out dangerously close to Social Democracy. The reason for this can be found in the fact that we've been relying on a body of Marxist thought which, while rich in principle and in an explanation of economic forces, still doesn't offer any precedents for such a time as now. We are seeing a different world than our books tell about. Some of our conclusions must necessarily be unprecedented.

Comrade Minor often, and very thrillingly, wrote on the new aspects of the situation, and I felt that we were adding a new leaf to Marxist thought. Since theory and objectives are, for Marxists, inseparable, so we must recognize that the events of recent weeks have shown us to be wrong in our reliance upon bourgeois "intelligence." Does this mean that we are to scrap all the conclusions reached and go back to a doctrinaire life of slogans and concepts based upon Lenin's imperialism? That's not Marxist method to me. Some of the criticism sounds like a clerical repetition of dogmas.

As we must deal with present-day capitalism, we must use Marxism applicable to it. We can't rely solely on Marxism of 1915 for the world of today. We must have a synthesis of the existing body of Marxist thought with new conclusions based upon a new set of world relations.

We haven't been completely wrong recently. Let's keep the good parts and not indiscriminately forget all our recent development. Above all, let's have a cessation of the recent deluge of "quotes" and references to authorities in a dogmatic manner.

A. K., Boston.

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Struggle for Negro Liberation

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This being so, our position that the Negro people have exercised their right of self-determination by deciding "to choose the path of integration of the Negroes into the whole American nation as one united nation" is wrong. This would mean that the Negro nation decided, of its own accord, to disperse itself and become completely assimilated with the American nation. This assertion runs counter to all other national liberation struggles of

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It is true that those elements of the bourgeoisie of the oppressed nation who serve the oppressing nation have often advocated this solution of the national problem. This is evidenced, for example, in the attempt of the Czech bourgeoisie and elements of the Slovak bourgeoisie to convince the Slovak nation that it really is not a nation, but a branch of the Czech nation, and that the solution of its problems lies in integration. The Slovak nation never accepted this advice, and the Communists in Slovakia fought against this attempt to disperse and assimilate the Slovak nation.

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