

## SPEECH BY ELIZABETH GURLEY FLYNN

COMRADES OF THE NATIONAL COMMITTEE:

It seems to me that every member of our National Board is called upon to make a searching statement as to his position on the Resolution before us, and on the mental processes that led up to the acceptance of the Resolution.

I don't think that any of us are now hoping to convince Comrade Browder, although I say quite frankly that I was one of those who started, after reading the Duclos article, with the hope that this could be accomplished. And if I have come under any "influence" in my thinking during the period I have been a member of the Communist organization, it is the influence of Comrade Browder. It has not been easy, in fact it has been a very painful and difficult experience to face this and eliminate it from my thinking. And so I make my remarks rather personal and that cannot be avoided.

I don't think we can answer this question by thumping our breasts and saying "mea culpa, mea culpa" over and over again. It's like the Irishman who after whacking his breast exceptionally hard groaned aloud, "Glory be to God—there goes me pipel!"

I think a lot of pipes will go with this kind of breast-thumping unless

we follow it with something more substantial than words.

I felt admiration for Comrades Green and Minor because they at least had undertaken to do what I knew myself to be incapable of doing. I don't have sufficient confidence in myself as a theoretician, I thought that they in all earnestness and sincerity couldn't just accept and brush aside the contradictions that seemed apparent, but that they had made a very earnest and serious attempt to reconcile our practical position with the theory of our movement. I believe Comrade Green did try to do so. I want to say now that I withdraw that estimation of Comrade Minor. I am sorry. I had a great affection for Bob over a period of years, but I was never aware of an intense and continued struggle between Comrades Minor and Browder. Maybe I am naive, but it appeared to me every time I heard Comrade Minor speak in the Board that Comrade Minor was out-Browdering Browder, and that he was fastened to Comrade Browder's mental apron strings, even to the extent of making Browder uncomfortable at times. I was happy at our Board meeting, which was one of the unhappiest meetings, to have the impression of seeing Comrade Minor cut those strings and honestly change his opinions. But apparently that is not correct. I don't think

Comrade Minor can convince me or anyone that he waged a continual struggle with Comrade Browder. In fact I felt, and I am going to speak frankly, that he used "Comrade Browder's approval" as a constant bludgeon against the rest of us in every difference of opinion, not only in the early phase of the discussion when he resisted the criticism of Comrade Duclos and the Resolution of the Board, but at all times. In the experiences I had during my secretaryship of the Committee in Defense of Comrade Browder, this was true. Up to Christmas time we were hamstrung and prevented from carrying on a mass campaign (and Comrade Foster will remember that I sent for him about this when I was sick and just out of the hospital). Comrade Minor always spoke in the most official and authoritative and final manner as to what Comrade Browder wanted in relation to the situation and against mass activity or publicity. I have to say this because I have to evaluate my fellow members of the Board as well as myself.

I can say quite frankly that I had a sort of inferiority complex toward these comrades. I haven't got it any more. In admitting I was wrong, I realize that they too were wrong. I suppose this inferiority feeling was partly due to the fact that I came into the Communist movement late in life and late in my labor experience. All my background in the I.W.W. was different from the approach to work and the concepts of

leadership in the Communist movement. I tried very hard to learn how to work as a Communist and how to work under this conception of leadership. I can tell you frankly it wasn't easy, because I went to Plenums where I was revolted by the repetition of acquiescence with everything Comrade Browder had said, in speeches prepared before he had made his speech, and I said to myself, "Elizabeth, there is just something wrong with you. After all, these comrades are all experienced, they have long years in the Communist movement, you were always engaged in struggles of a mass character as an agitator, and you are just not on the beam. You will have to learn to work this way. This is the proper attitude toward leadership."

And so, I thought, you have got to shed your leftist deviation, sister, you have to learn to work as a Communist. And this gave me an inferiority complex which I now see I had. I feel a lot better since I got rid of it. There were so many times I didn't speak at Plenums because I felt I didn't have anything to say and yet I had a lot to say. I would go out among the miners and would know what their problems are and what the miners were thinking, but on my return nobody would ask me whether I had any opinions on this subject. I thought, "Well, they know it already. There's nothing I can tell them they don't know, so what's the use?" I was absolutely wrong not

to speak out.

This has been a difficult period in my life and it has been a relief to get away from official meetings and get out into the districts. That's probably why I fought to get out of New York and into the other districts. There I felt more of an equal, more at home. And I am not reflecting on any attitude of comrades here toward me. It was of my own making; I see now that it grew out of my too ready outward acceptance of everything Comrade Browder said. And to what I didn't accept I assumed a sort of evasive method. I can see now that I read out of *Teheran* and *Victory and After* that which I understood and believed in and I presented this in my speeches and forgot about the rest of it. I interpreted *Teheran* especially as a book of struggle. This was entirely wrong. There is that element in the book; but essentially I put into Comrade Browder's book things which weren't there and now Browder has taken out a great deal that was in there, as I interpreted it.

I feel that I have applied this fear of being "leftist" and being a "Wobbly" to my estimation of Comrade Foster's position. I said, "Well, Bill's an old Wobbly too and he has the same kind of deviations I could easily have." This was unjust to Comrade Foster. Somehow I never talked it over with him because I was afraid he was going to convince me and that if I was convinced I would be out of step with

the organization as a whole. I wanted unity and was willing to conform to achieve it. This is a frank discussion on my part, but I think it's good for the soul to say some of the things that have been on our minds for such a long time and were responsible for our many weaknesses and that we say these things in a personal as well as in a political sense. It is easy enough to take "collective responsibility" and make a reservation that the other guy was always wrong but that I always had the right things back in my mind. That's not good. It is not a good way to face the future.

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I came back to New York City from a trip to discuss the Duclos article. The comrades should have sent for us—both Comrade Hudson and myself. I don't think it was exactly fair that there would be discussions carried on over a period of time on the floor in which absent members were not able to participate. The other comrades were three or four steps ahead of us and slightly patronizing toward us when we returned. They acted as if we were awfully slow to catch up. They already had the benefit of a thorough discussion. But I didn't and I came up fighting, with the feeling that we should defend our line and defend the leadership of Comrade Browder, and I was very much surprised that the other comrades didn't react in the same way. Even Comrade Browder in his foreword was

apparently yielding to the Duclos criticism at that point. Gil Green passed me a note to the effect that "we all felt like you do, at first"—very subjective, very angry, excited. They said Bob Minor had been flaying around in all directions; and it would have been bad for Duclos if he were in the vicinity. Well, I felt better. I will catch up somehow, I thought.

I can say quite frankly that I didn't really begin to see the light until some members began to discuss it with me in detail. And it is my fault as much as the others. This was the first time that I had a long discussion with some of the leading comrades, the first time I have had a thorough discussion with at least two members of the National Board. I felt I was sort of a visiting member—sort of a pitcher full of information when I went out into the field. The only trouble with that was I didn't have all the answers. I had the pitcher full all right, but after the pitcher was empty I didn't have the answers to the questions and I found myself even getting angry with people who were asking questions. And then I thought there's something wrong with you, Elizabeth, when you get impatient when workers ask you questions. And this was the mood I came back in.

I had a long talk with Comrade Williamson, and I deeply appreciated it because he gave me a review of the thinking of the other

members of the Board and he began to straighten out my remaining kinks. But I was not entirely convinced until I heard Comrade Browder make his remarks at the final meeting of our Board, and a very painful experience it was. I saw that this is not the direction that I can go along, and not the direction that I can explain, to lead other people. After all I may not have the clearest conception of Marxism, but as I learned it from experience in movements of the masses—in the I.W.W., it was based on the class struggle, on the conception of organizing the workers, as the basic power in the progressive movement, based on the necessity for struggle. It certainly was not based on any confidence in the employing class, in the capitalists or imperialists. I had felt that maybe this was the right policy for the war period, but somehow or other it didn't fit as a long-term perspective. If Comrade Browder had earlier made it clear how far his thinking went and that this was *such* a long-term perspective, I don't think anyone of us could have accepted it. We are a Party based fundamentally on the working class and its struggles. The hardest thing I did and the one I can least forgive myself for was to stop talking about Socialism entirely. It was a violation of almost forty years of my basic purpose in the working class movement of this country. I am sure my father turned over in his grave, although I know

he had already turned over when I defended Winston Churchill, but he turned over again in this period. I think we have to face all these things honestly. We substituted our immediate program for the ultimate goal. For a long time I didn't see these things clearly and all of a sudden I feel I came out of the fog; thanks to Comrade Duclos holding a mirror up to us and forcing us to examine ourselves.

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But I have one thing to be happy for, I am glad I didn't write a book. I wondered why I didn't, and made excuses to myself. Five years ago, at a National Convention I got an assignment to write a book. But first I have my ancestors. They were Irish and militant fighters against England for 750 years. I could not dispose of my ancestors or suddenly make them collaborators. So I thought, well, they're out, for this period at least. And then my own background. At the age of 16 I entered into a period of twenty years of the most intense and violent strike struggles which this country has seen. And I thought, well, if I am going to tell them as they really were—these tremendous struggles of the people for their basic rights, it's likely to agitate and inspire people to go out on strike or have the perspective of strikes in the postwar period. So that goes out. And then there's the question of labor defense. Years of bitter struggle for the rights

of the working class against frame-ups, Moyer-Haywood, Joe Hill, Mooney and Billings, Sacco-Vanzetti, and countless others. How could I picture capitalists as I have known them as brothers under the skin or the lamb and the lion lying together for an indefinite period of class collaboration? I saw my book was out, because it did not fit our line. I cannot make my book in that kind of a presentation. It was impossible. Now I feel kind of pepped up. I can keep my ancestors, the great strikes and labor defense, and everything of the heroic struggles of the American working class and the American people for their basic rights for the past four decades, of which the struggle against fascism is a logical part.

In the postwar future we may need the inspiration of our traditions and struggles in the past. You cannot tell the miners that they can work with the operators in postwar planning. I have tried it and it can't be done. As far as the miners are concerned, they hate the operators and they hate John L. Lewis, and they are waiting for us to present a constructive program that they can carry on into the postwar period.

Well, this speech is partly biographical, partly confessional, and partly an evaluation of our weaknesses. I cannot understand why I am never afraid to go out and talk to a group of miners or steel workers or workers anywhere in the country, and why I was afraid of our

own National Board and the National Committee. There's some kind of atmosphere we created. It is bad and let's get rid of it and let's say the sky is the limit to speak our minds when we hear an honest question or difference of opinion. I promise you, if I am one of the lucky ones (and I would not be surprised if I am not on the new National Committee because I have been equally guilty with all others), I promise you that there will never be another meeting of the National Committee that Elizabeth Gurley Flynn doesn't speak her mind on any subject either because she has differences or can make a contribution.

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As Board members we must all speak frankly now of our reservations, self-enforced silences, or too ready unthinking acceptances. We must explain the difficult ordeal we have all gone through in facing the errors we have made and also the prolonged struggle we have had in trying to convince Earl Browder. Our change of position was not a sudden overnight business, nor was it superficial, as it may seem to some observers. Comrade Earl Browder has apparently locked his mind against either our persuasion or the logic of events. We have tried to find the key but to no avail. The Duclos article first, and the prompt agreement of our membership even before the publication of the Board

resolution, plus the effect it had on our Board and on the other members of the National Committee—surely all this should be the key to unlock the mind of Earl Browder as a Communist.

It is a sad state of mental isolation and arrogance, even if unconscious, which persists in a refusal to do anything more than to re-affirm one's original position and substantiate it with self-quotations. We have all contributed to making Earl Browder believe himself infallible. Let us never abandon collective leadership in the future, in this manner. I personally feel profoundly sorry for what has happened to Earl Browder. I hope the withdrawal of some of the causative factors may effect a cure. If so, he could do far better work in the future than in the past. If not, no one, no matter how good, is irreplaceable. My advice to Comrade Browder, unsolicited and unwelcome though it may be, is to break down your reserves, which have been a barrier between you and your fellow-workers and find your answers among people, not in research and study alone. You are a hard man to talk to, nobody feels he really knows you, nobody feels free to approach you. Is it shyness and modesty, as we believed? Now, frankly, your attitude causes doubt. If you had mixed with the people, gone into their homes, checked your thoughts with them, as Lenin did—you would not be so isolated today. If you had even mixed with

your own comrades—you could have understood them better. Take a trip around the country, alone, unknown, unhonored, and unsung, but *meet the people*, Earl, and learn to be one of them once again. It is not we but you who have come under “alien influences,” I fear, which placed you apart and above, aloof and unresponsive to the workers; which made you move less and less

among them; which made you magnify the importance of contacting influential persons rather than masses; which separated you from the instincts and heart beats of the people. It may be a long and hard road back, but this is the only one I see for you. Then maybe you can find the key to unlock the closed mind and once again “free Earl Browder.”