

SUMMARY 1919-1921I. Objective Conditions

A. What was the international situation as it affected the United States and the developing communist party?

The contradictions of imperialism, especially those of the European powers, brought about World War I, which led to the breaking up of the old political and economic order. "Europe lay in ruins" and the main question of the day was whether all of Europe, or large parts of it, would follow the way of the Russian workers and peasants--socialist revolution--or whether the capitalist class would be able to reconstruct bourgeois society in Europe. Revolutionary Russia was still under attack by the capitalist powers, but the interventionist forces had been decisively defeated.

The world war revealed the deep contradictions within socialism, as the majority of European socialists took social-chauvinist stands on the participation of "their" countries in the imperialist war. Largely through the efforts of the Russian communists, the Third International was created to bring into existence a principled international Marxist movement, to win over revolutionary socialists from the Second International, to create genuine Marxist parties in every country, and to make revolution in those countries where conditions were ripe. (See Part III The Comintern.)

The efforts of the Comintern centered on Europe in this period, where a revolutionary situation existed in several, if not many, countries, e.g. Germany, Poland, Hungary, Italy. The colonies had begun to enter on the road to national liberation and revolution, but the struggle had not yet advanced very far.

B. What were the main economic developments in the United States?

The capitalist class of the United States came out of World War I in a very strong position. They were in control of a rising imperialist power, a country which had become the strongest economic and military power in the world. Of all the other major powers, only Japan had likewise emerged unscathed from the war, and Japan was considerably weaker than the United States economically and militarily.

Considerable capital had been amassed by U.S. capitalists during the war, and in the post-war period the U.S. capitalists and their state continued to be expansionist, seeking new locations for the export of capital. Capital was invested in Latin America, Europe, and the Far East, and troops were sent to protect the investments.

The merger of bank and industrial capital into finance capital had occurred, and the bankers were dominant. There were few if any restrictions on banking.

However, against these favorable conditions for U.S. capital, the post-war period brought falling production in those industries producing war material; economic dislocations due to the loss of markets in war-devastated countries; large numbers of returning soldiers and new immigrants, adding to mounting unemployment at home; and demands for wage-gains to make up ground lost during the war. A recession which began in Japan in March 1920 affected the United States soon afterward and became world-wide.

C. What was the situation in the workers' movement?

The conditions just mentioned led to the highest strike level up to that time (1919) in U.S. history. The workers were extremely militant and sometimes struck for more than bread-and-butter issues (such as the Seattle strike). The rank and file, often aided by the International Workers of the World, or Wobblies as they were often called, frequently wildcatted or struck for the right to have a union.

There had been considerable opposition to the war by workers and there was a great deal of support and sympathy for the revolution in Russia, but the main thrust of the strike movement was clearly not for the overthrow of the state. It was largely spontaneous militancy, fought by the trade union leadership which was the American Federation of Labor (AFL), and not under communist leadership. The "leadership" of the workers, the AFL, was thoroughly corrupt, already bribed by the profits and super-profits of American imperialism.

The working class was divided in several crippling ways, chiefly along national lines: Black/white and native-born/foreign-born. The white working class was distinctly infected with white chauvinism. Only a small percent of the class was in unions, and for the most part these were white, English-speaking Northern European males. These divisions made unity in action more a wish than a reality, and aided the bourgeoisie in its rapid destruction of the militant, largely, spontaneous working class movement.

For further study: in an imperialist country, according to Lenin, the bourgeoisie is able to use super-profits from colonial exploitation to buy off the upper stratum of workers, to create an "aristocracy of labor." Some of us consider it clear that this did occur in the United States in this period and that significant sections of the workers did become bourgeoisified," e.g. many workers in craft unions. Others agree that the labor leaders were bought off, but see a need for further study before taking a position on how deeply into the American working class "bourgeoisification" penetrated.

D. What was the situation among Black workers and in the Black movement?

Blacks were coming north in great numbers and joining the industrial work force, where they were excluded from the unions and hence from work that paid well. Generally Blacks had to take the hardest, most back-breaking jobs at the lowest wages. As in the South, though to a lesser degree, Blacks were subjected to systematic oppression on and off the job. In these conditions Blacks sometimes were forced to take employment as strikebreakers in order to survive. As a result of all these factors, there was a lot of hard feeling between Black and white workers, and racial conflicts broke out in a number of cities.

Chauvinism on the part of the American Marxists led them to direct almost no attention to the special oppression of Blacks. When the Left did mention the struggle of Blacks, it was to note that their struggle was basically no different from that of the white workers, that is, a class struggle. It completely failed to take up racial and national aspects of Black oppression.

Overall, relations between white workers and white communists on the one hand, and Blacks on the other, seem to have been either bad or non-existent.

Black workers did not have a strong organized movement in this period, though there were unionizing efforts among Black railway workers.

The Black movement consisted mainly of the Pan-African movement, which was divided into the Garvey movement and a smaller group of intellectuals (also sometimes called "the Pan-African movement"). The Garvey movement was large, vital, short-lived, African nationalist, and largely petty-bourgeois and bourgeois in its aims, leadership, and character. It revealed there was explosive Black discontent, and that this could be rallied around a utopian nationalist cause.

The "Pan-African movement" (which was an international movement) was much smaller, largely literary and propagandistic, led by the educated Black petty-bourgeoisie. Though the programs put forward at the Pan-African congresses of 1919 and 1921 were not progressive, the existence of a Pan-African movement was a positive aspect of the anti-colonialist struggle.

E. What were the major political developments in the United States, especially the role of the bourgeoisie and state in relation to the workers movement, the left and the Black movement?

The state met the great militancy of the workers' resistance, the birth of the tiny communist movement, and the Garvey movement with strong repression. The spontaneous workers' movement, which was very powerful in 1919, was crushed, so that by 1921 little of the militancy remained. The strike movement was broken up by the use of troops, police, and injunctions on the part of the federal, state, and local governments. There was governmental collaboration with the bourgeoisie in a thousand ways: working out strategy, aiding company goon squads, enforcing the law on strikers only, etc. The "Red scare" tactics employed by the bourgeoisie had the effect of dividing the working class from communist leadership, while serious mistakes by the communists aided this process. A bit later the ruling class also employed the "soft" tactic of pushing "the American plan" (open shops, stocksharing, etc.) to counter the threat posed by workers' militancy and the Russian "alternative."

The communist movement was isolated, tiny, weak, and the rest of the left was not very strong either. But, frightened by the risings of the Russian and European working classes and their allies, the U.S. ruling class unleashed the hysteria of the "Red scare." The Palmer raids attacked the Socialist Party, Wobblies, and the communists. The developing communist movement was severely crippled by these raids.

The state was also used by the ruling class to defuse the discontent embodied in the Garvey movement. In particular, mail-fraud charges were fabricated against the leadership.

These three years (1919-1921) saw the transition from the policies of Wilson to those of the Republican presidents of the 1920's. This meant a more prominent public orientation toward business within the presidency itself, leaving behind the "agonies" of the "failure of Wilsonianism" as well as the moral cover provided by Wilson's allegedly primary concern ("making the world safe for democracy"). In place of the doubts raised by "foreign war," the complacency of "the American way of life."

F. Were objective conditions in the United States favorable for a revolution?

Objective conditions were definitely unfavorable for a revolution, whether of a socialist kind (most of the United States) or of a new-democratic kind (if that was what was called for in the South). U.S. capital was still "young," growing rapidly, had been absolutely and relatively strengthened by the war. The country itself had been untouched by the war (not bombed, no fighting on its soil), and while many American soldiers had been killed or injured, much of the resistance to this was successfully turned aside in patriotism. The military forces remained "ever faithful." The army, navy, marines, militia, and police were firmly under the command of the ruling class. Economically, while great poverty and destitution existed in many parts of the United States, the economic fabric of society had not been torn apart by the war.

Politically, there was no real crisis of bourgeois democracy in the United States. While third party movements were stronger in the period 1900-1924 than they have been before or since (with a couple of exceptions), none of them posed a serious threat to the two-party system or the entire American bourgeois-democratic structure.

On the positive side, there were at times extreme discontent and militant action by workers in this period. As mentioned, there had been substantial opposition to the war in various sections of the population; there was some solidarity with the Bolshevik revolution; the depth of the oppression of Blacks, especially in the racist, terrorist South, had been revealed by the flare-up of the Garvey movement. But none of these factors indicate the existence of either of two objective conditions for revolution: that the ruling class can no longer rule in the old way, and that the workers and their allies have found through their own experience that revolution is the only way out.

II. Subjective Conditions: the communist parties in the United States

A. What were the programs of the parties?

(The programs of the Communist Party and the Communist Labor Party agreed in fundamentals. This evaluation is based on the Communist Party's program.)

The 1919 program marked an advance over previous "Marxist" programs of U.S. socialist organizations and at the same time a break with reformist socialism. But this advance was primarily on matters of principle, e.g. upholding the dictatorship of the proletariat, reliance on class struggle rather than parliamentary activity, proletarian internationalism rather than defense of the nation.

The grave, crippling weakness of this program was clearly insufficient knowledge of American conditions, and failure to apply these principles to American conditions. The program, with a few modifications, could "apply" to many capitalist countries. This lack of knowledge of conditions led the CP to base its program on the assumption that a revolutionary situation existed in the United States when in fact it did not. Other weaknesses of the program include:

1. No attempt to present an account of the development and state of classes in U.S. society. Instead, a few phrases about workers and capitalists, with a rare mention of middle elements. Nor are these phrases even set in a presentation

of the development of monopoly capital and American bourgeois democracy.

2. Little or no attention to long-term policies (strategy) or methods, again because the CP believed the capitalist system was about to collapse in the United States and in the world.

3. Little or no attention to oppressed nationalities in the United States. There is mention of the "Negroes," but only of their "economic bondage and oppression," their class oppression. That is, liquidation of the racial or other national aspects of Black oppression.

4. No united action with other forces on the Left (Socialist Party, Labor Party, Non-Partisan League) under any conditions. This was carrying the necessary breaking with centrism too far.

While the program could be loosely called "Marxist," it would be impossible to show that it represented a genuine application of Marxist principles and methods to U.S. conditions. The errors and weaknesses outweigh the positive aspects.

The major errors reflect dogmatism (phrases and slogans instead of investigation of conditions) and "Left" sectarianism (no united activity with any other groups on the Left, destroying the existing trade unions).

B. What were the relations between the communist parties and the workers' movement?

When the CP and the CLP formed in 1919, they supported "dual unionism." The CLP endorsed the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), which they saw as the key revolutionary organization in the American trade union movement. The CP supported the formation of a new "industrial union organization, embracing the IWW, Workers International Industrial Union (WIIU), independent and secession unions, militant unions of the AFL, and unorganized workers, on the basis of revolutionary class struggle." Generally the CP was more critical of the IWW.

The CP supported industrial unionism and mass strikes and said in their program that "the CP shall participate in mass strikes, not only to achieve the immediate purpose of the strike, but to develop the revolutionary implications of the mass strike." It went on to emphasize mass strikes as developing workers' understanding and as being the road to power. The CP also advocated contact with industrial plants in its territory and the organization of shop committees. It urged support of workers' movements in industry (their limitations to be pointed out), and industrial organization of unskilled workers.

The CP program was weak on specifics but had some aspects that were positive as far as the program went, such as industrial organizing, support of militant AFL unions, organizing the unorganized, and supporting the workers' movements in shops and connecting them to the CP (or CLP). However, the trade union practice of the CP was either non-existent or ultra-Left in approach in those cities where the CP had units. Ruthenberg himself said that few of the leadership knew anything about trade unions or had any contact with even the rank and file members. The year 1919 saw one strike after another, but the communists were largely outside them. Strikes for wages and conditions were dismissed in the CP press unless they turned into revolutionary action against capitalism.

The CP correctly stated the need to broaden and politicize the strike, but by refusing to work in the AFL, CP members were in no position to organize these or any other strikes. "This is one of the tasks of the CP, the destruction of the existing trade union organizations," wrote The Communist. Instead, the CP tried to draw the workers away into its own ranks by agitation and propoganda. This policy did not change significantly until 1921, under pressure from the Comintern and with the rise of Foster.

The CP's practice in the trade union movement was primarily negative because, 1) it failed to go where the organized workers were and was therefore not able to recruit or propogandize effectively among the skilled workers, and 2) it failed to actively organize the unorganized, and so missed a good opportunity to bring workers under communist leadership. The pressing task of organizing the unorganized was much more effectively undertaken by the IWW in this period.

The isolation and ineffectiveness of the CP was primarily because of a sectarian "the workers must come to us" political line, based on the mistaken view that the United States was in a revolutionary period and the workers would inevitably come to the party. But other important factors were 1) state repression and arrest of most leaders, with costly legal battles following, and 2) the breaking up and forming of new communist organizations several times during this period, which made consistent communist work in the trade unions almost impossible.

C. What were the national, class, and sexual composition of the communist parties?

The most marked division in the Communist Labor Party, Communist Party, United Communist Party, and the Communist Party of America was between the foreign-born, organized into foreign language federations, and the native-born members. After the Michigan Socialists left the CP, the CP was only 3% English-speaking. Of the immigrant members, 75% were East European, of which 25% were Russian. In the CLP, nor more than 10% were native English speakers. In this period, the leadership was both foreign-born and native-born, but by 1921 native-born leadership predominated. Probably no Blacks were members; none attended either founding convention. Probably no Asians or Latinos were members. The national composition probably did not change much with the formation of the United Communist Party or the Communist Party of America, though there was a sharp drop in total membership.

As far as membership figures went, all these parties were mostly of the industrial working class. Most members of the foreign language federations were immigrants, unskilled and unorganized, in the worst jobs. However, many had joined the communist parties by way of the foreign language federations. Members of these federations were not necessarily Marxists. So when the federations joined the communist parties (primarily the CP), the parties gained worker members who were, in some cases, not Marxists.

Leadership tended to be either self-educated immigrants (Bittelman, Fraina) or educated sons of immigrants (Ruthenberg). A few were well-educated, native-born men from the petty-bourgeoisie (Reed, Eastman). By the middle of 1921, leadership had begun to shift. (Ruthenberg and Gitlow were in jail.) Men of native-born and trade union backgrounds began to gain influence; namely, Foster, Cannon, and Browder. The leadership of all parties was predominantly male, policy-making leadership exclusively male in this period. There were some active women organizers like Ella Reeve Bloor. Among the rank and file, some women may have

been involved through the language federations. Little attention was paid to organizing women workers.

The parties suffered in this period from the division between the foreign language federations and the native born. The refusal of the foreign language federation leadership to adapt itself or its politics to the conditions of the United States contributed heavily to the parties' isolation. On the other hand, the parties failed to use their support from many immigrants to organize them into unions or introduce them to Marxism. Failure to recruit Blacks was a symptom of white chauvinism in the parties. That and neglect of the national question made organizing among Blacks in the North or South impossible.

D. What was the organizational structure of the communist parties and how well did democratic centralism function?

Before the Palmer raid, the Communist Party and the Communist Labor Party were not structured much differently than was the old Socialist Party. They had branches in major cities, open meetings, and everything was published in their press. After a couple of months (that is, about March 1920), the CP renamed their National Executive Committee the Central Executive Committee and attempted to organize by industry rather than on a geographical basis. Later, the United Communist Party had a National Executive Committee composed of ten members, ten being chosen to accommodate the two factions equally.

After going underground, branches were transformed to small cells or groups, usually about ten members, headed by an organizer who collected dues, distributed leaflets and papers, and was in touch with other party bodies. Groups might meet once a week, hear reports, etc. In May 1921, the Communist Party of America underground party was formed which had as a basic unit groups of about ten members. Up to ten sections made a sub-district. Two or more sub-districts made a district.

The parties' view, and Foster's, was that going underground made for a small, tightly disciplined party core, but Howe questions this, probably correctly, because membership figures show a large turnover in this period and some reports show that meetings were irregular and routine work often neglected. (Foster, History of the CPUSA and Howe and Coser, The American Communist Party 1919-1957) Certainly the Comintern and sections of the U.S. party (including Foster) thought the party stayed underground too long and correctly saw the need for open, legal work.

During this period, the parties failed to firmly establish democratic centralism, primarily because the foreign language federations did not wish to give up their autonomy, and also because of fierce factionalism. The lack of democratic centralism resulted in two problems: 1) failure to struggle openly with the Comintern at times (the U.S. party was reluctant to change its trade union policy, engage in legal work, etc., as instructed by the Comintern), followed by failure to implement the Comintern directives, and 2) failure to develop and carry through a united plan of action for the party in the light of the party program.

Despite the political, organizational, and programmatic weaknesses of the early communist parties in the United States, their very creation was a significant step forward from the Socialist Party. They broke with reformism and upheld the necessity for revolution and abolition of capitalism. They were internationalist in

outlook and by the end of 1921, despite intense factionalism, still held together as a communist organization.

III. The Comintern

A. The creation of the Comintern and its assessment of the period.

As mentioned earlier, the Third International was created in 1919 at its First Congress. The creation marked a victory for Marxism, for genuine Marxism over sham Marxism, for international Marxism over nationalist Marxism, for Leninism over Bernsteinism, Kautskyism, and other forms of economist "Marxism," for the lone revolutionary party (the Bolsheviks) over the many reformist social-democratic European parties. The views, line, and organization of the first world communist party, the Comintern, were developed in the next two years, which were marked by two subsequent congresses, II Comintern Congress in 1920 and III Comintern Congress in 1921. The development of a program for the Comintern was postponed, particularly in light of the opportunities for revolutionary actions and battles in this period. This was an entirely correct way of proceeding in these conditions.

The Comintern had a generally correct appraisal of the world situation in this period, as indicated below.

The post-war revival of 1919-1920 in Europe and elsewhere collapsed in the second half of 1920, leading to at least European-wide economic and political crisis. The Comintern probably over-estimated the breadth, and in some countries, the depth of this crisis (e.g. United States, Britain). Nevertheless, in 1919 and 1920 there was a revolutionary situation in countries like Germany and Italy, and at the I Comintern Congress and the II Comintern Congress, the Comintern recognized this and advocated offensive tactics. By 1921 the European situation had changed, and a retreat was called for in the face of successful capitalist resistance to attempts at revolution. This coincided with the necessary retreat in Russia marked by the New Economic Policy (NEP) after the years of "war communism." The Comintern recognized the new situation and changed its tactics ("to the masses"). It appears that at times the Comintern tried to apply tactics European-wide simultaneously, and did not take into account the conditions or timing in a given country.

B. Relations between the Comintern and the U.S. communist movement.

At the I Comintern Congress (1919) there was a lack of detailed information about U.S. communists and conditions, and inadequate U.S. representation. When the Communist Party and Communist Labor Party came into existence, the Comintern correctly tried to enforce organizational unity between them, since there were no major differences in principle between the two groups. But the Comintern failed to see that the United States was not then in a revolutionary situation and did not sufficiently criticize the "Left" policies of the U.S. communists in 1919 and 1920.

At the II Comintern Congress (1929), the Comintern correctly attacked the trade union policy of the Americans, advocating working within the AFL.

At the III Comintern Congress (1921), the Comintern did indirectly recognize the United States was not in a revolutionary situation, and it correctly pushed for the Communist Party of America to become legal and to undertake the "first and simplest task of creating a communist nucleus and connecting it with the working

masses." The CPA definitely did need to break out of its isolation. The Comintern also advocated communists working for a U.S. labor party. (See "Summary 1922-1928," pp. 27-28.)

In this period, the American communists tended to agree with the Comintern line at congresses, but balked at or were unable to carry it out, e.g. the twenty-one conditions of admission, the fight against factionalism, the changeover from offensive to defensive tactics ("to the masses," use of bourgeois legality). The American party was still in the process of being born, was changing rapidly in membership, and was already split by sectarianism and factionalism, and so could not apply any line fully and consistently.

C. The member parties of the Comintern.

All of the member parties of the Comintern were weak ideologically, politically, and organizationally, with a few exceptions, primarily the Russian and to a lesser extent the German party. Nearly all of the parties were new, born out of the split with the Second International. They had to fight for the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat, against "parliamentary cretinism," against centrism, etc. They also had to fight, though to a lesser extent, "Left" deviations on these points. Further, they had the immense task of putting this ideological and political struggle before the people: they had to build a Leninist party rooted in the working class.

All parties had the support and inspiration of the first socialist revolution, the October revolution. This revolution had to a large extent enabled the communist parties to come into existence and to begin to develop. Without at least one party holding state power, it would have been impossible to develop the new parties as fast as they were developed (not forgetting their many weaknesses); and since that party was in fact the only genuine Marxist party in history, this made it possible for the new communist parties to truly make a break with the crippling reformist and economist theory and practice of all the parties of the Second International.

But there was only one successful model, so that both successful and unsuccessful, as well as inappropriate, features of Russian experience were bound to be imprinted on the new communist parties. E.g. simplistic analogies with Russian soviets and the Russian peasants, overemphasis on the conscious element in making revolution, the "Russian style" of writing resolutions, and in general, simplistic universalizations of the experience of the Russian revolution. Some of the communist parties were able to seize state power, following the Bolsheviks, but none were able to retain it. The failures in Germany in 1919, 1921, and 1923, in Hungary in 1919, in Italy in 1920, along with the retreat in Russia represented by NEP, led Lenin to stress the need to study during the period of respite and forced the new communist parties to take the roundabout course of winning over the majority of the workers by patient, arduous work under non-revolutionary conditions.