

'I TAKE A FRESH LOOK' (3)

Party Crisis—Subjective Factors

By ALEXANDER BITTELMAN

CONCERNING subjective factors, the first thing to note is the influence of environment upon the thinking and feelings of our membership and sympathizers. Our isolation, strictly speaking, is a one-way affair: we cannot influence much the environment, but the environment has had considerable influence upon the condition of the Party.

The membership was bound to be deeply affected by such widespread views as that Communism and the Communist Party were failures in the United States. There was bound to arise a doubting and questioning attitude on things long recognized as the truth. What is the future of our Party? What is the American road to Socialism? Is there indeed such a road? If so, what is the role of the Party? What are to be its new relations to the trade unions and other movements of the people? Above all, how to meet the terrible isolation that has been moving in on us and how did it come about? What has been happening to the non-Communist left?

MANY OF these questions began to make their appearance way back, soon after the war's end in 1945. With the growth of the Party's isolation and intensified government persecutions, elements of internal crisis could already be observed in the following years, such as: tendencies of general ideological and political disorientation, a drop of Party authority among members and sympathizers, a rapid decline in membership, heavy losses among industrial workers and the Negro people, a wavering of Party policy be-

tween so-called left sectarianism and right opportunism.

On the left within the Party, there was a consistent over-estimation of the war and fascist dangers and the formulation of policies which had few points of contact with the attitudes and moods of the trade unions and other people's movements.

On the right we had just as consistent an under-estimation of these dangers and the formulation of policies which rarely attained their stated objective of significant united action of non-Communists with Communists. Neither of these currents in the Party could produce policies whose implementation would stay the oncoming tide of isolation.

The unexpressed attitude of the left in the Party seemed to be to sit out the bad objective situation and wait for favorable changes. The unexpressed attitude of the right seemed to be to go along with whatever was moving in a generally progressive direction with no particular thought of how this might affect the influence and strength of the Party. Actual Party attitudes vacillated between the two and had little effect if any in retarding the developing Party crisis.

INTERESTINGLY, the estimates of economic conditions and perspectives since 1945 produced no fixed "right" and "left" differences. There were under-estimators and over-estimators in both currents. This suggests that economic estimates had little to do with essential political differences. The reason for this is that economic developments played only a very indirect part in the emergence of the Party crisis.

It is important to emphasize here that while the Party was in great difficulties and in crisis, it nevertheless made valiant, persistent efforts to help promote the struggles of the American people on the crucial progressive and humanitarian issues of our time. Recall the significant pioneering role of the Party in the "cold war" years, in the fight for peace, democracy, Bill of Rights, the rights of the Negro people, for economic security and against monopoly domination.

That the Party's policies here did not always succeed in becoming fully effective among the masses of the people, explains much of the Party's isolation and crisis. But it detracts not a whit from the correctness of the Party's principled positions on all these issues—positions in the best interests of the American people. Historians of the future, I am sure, will so record it. They will also see as an historic achievement both the Party's ability to frustrate the reactionary attempts to destroy it, and the Party's capacity to take an honest look into its present deep, severe crisis and to begin to come to grips with some of its problems.

ONE OF THE most important subjective factors in making the Party crisis was our failure to evaluate the major experiences and consequences of the New Deal period. These experiences have had a profound effect upon the class struggle and its perspectives. We are in need of a complete estimate of the New Deal period.

Among the developments which we failed to fully evaluate were: the so-called welfare
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trends and ideas among the masses of the people, especially trade unions; the full significance of the people's aspiration toward what is popularly known as the Welfare State and their belief that here is the answer to the nation's crucial social problems; the new role, strength and influence of the trade unions, not only as economic organizations but as key forces in the nation's progress; the leading role of the mass movements of the Negro people and of other progressive mass movements. Failure to evaluate adequately and in time these historic developments — all of them direct consequences and effects of the New Deal period — has proven the most potent subjective source of our isolation and crisis.

This failure has two aspects. One is the failure to see that new paths have opened and new forms come into being for the struggle for the welfare and progress of the people. A timely and full estimate of these developments from the principled positions of Marxism-Leninism would have enabled the Party to see better the specific American way to significant social progress in this epoch and eventually to Socialism. We failed to draw from these developments therefore the correct pro-

grammatic and political conclusions.

THE OTHER aspect of this failure was the perpetuation of obsolete concepts on the relations between the Party and progressive movements of the people, especially unions. The effects of the New Deal period called for a reappraisal of the concrete forms in which the Party could express its vanguard role in the new historic situations. This we still have not done and still need to do. In practice, we either pursued the old forms of the concept of vanguard role without regard to the new conditions or tended to abandon this key concept altogether. Result: deepening isolation and crisis.

The chief sources of these and similar failures must be traced to the origins and first steps of Marxism and Marxist-inspired movements in the United States. We find a persistent, dogmatic trend in the thinking and conclusions of American Marxists. This dogmatic and sectarian trend has been characteristic of both the Right and Left through the entire history of the socialist movement in the United States. This would indicate a major objective source feeding this trend in socialist thinking.

(Tomorrow: Party Crisis—The Nature of the Party's Dogmatism.)