

# **EDUCATION FOR SOCIALISTS**

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## **THE REVOLUTIONARY PARTY**

**A Review of Four Books by James P. Cannon:**

**THE FIRST TEN YEARS OF AMERICAN COMMUNISM**

**THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN TROTSKYISM**

**THE STRUGGLE FOR A PROLETARIAN PARTY**

**LETTERS FROM PRISON**

**BY MILTON ALVIN**

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## THE REVOLUTIONARY PARTY

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These four volumes represent the experience and opinions of the founder of American Trotskyism, who was also a founder of the Communist Party in this country and prior to that an active participant in the Industrial Workers of the World and the left wing of the Socialist Party. Cannon's experience encompasses almost the entire span of years of the existence of proletarian radicalism in the 20th century in this country, and not only in this country. Since 1919 when the Communist Party was formed he has played a leading role in building the authentic revolutionary socialist party. As a student of as well as a leader in this endeavor he has written extensively on the problems of the American revolution. The four volumes under review here represent a summation of the history of those years as well as the author's ideas.

No one else has tried to write in this field as extensively as Cannon has, either regarding the United States or any other country. Even Lenin, whose theories on the party inspired and taught Cannon, did not put down his ideas as systematically and thoroughly as Cannon has.

However, before we begin our review we must deal with two problems. First, we have to answer the new challenges to the idea of building a revolutionary party. Second, we have to explain why we are taking these four volumes en bloc instead of one by one.

Taking the second problem first, it seems that the subject matter lends itself to this kind of treatment; it is better to take up the question as a whole rather than to chop it up into segments in time as Cannon had to do in the circumstances, where he wrote or put together various articles, speeches and letters in order to make up a book. The publication dates range from 1943 for the first of these books to 1968 for the fourth.

Next, we must answer the main question, the challenge to the idea itself.

Is a revolutionary party needed in America? Those who say it is are currently challenged from various sides. Unlike previous debates on this question, for example those of the 1930's, some opponents of the idea of organizing and building a revolutionary party attack the idea per se; they do not counterpose their version of a party to that of others. They say a party is not required, in fact, they believe it to be an obstacle.

Formerly, radical and socialist circles debated the question from the

standpoint of arguing that one kind of party was superior to others. But all or nearly all accepted the idea that some kind of party was needed. That has been changed today into an attack on the whole conception of the party itself, without much regard to its special kind.

The opponents of the revolutionary party, that is, a Leninist party, may be classified under three general headings. First there are the confrontationists and spontaneists who believe that any formal or nearly formal organization is not needed and is, in fact, a handicap to the masses. They believe that the masses, under their own power and without leadership, will arise and make the revolution. They look upon any type of organization with suspicion and distrust, believing that any party or similar organization must become a conservative influence that will hold back the mass upsurge. Therefore, this element is opposed to the idea of the party in principle, without regard to one kind of party or another.

Second, there are those who favor a "movement," rather than a single party. The idea of a "movement" is not very clearly formulated but in essence boils down to hopes that existing parties, groups, tendencies and prominent individuals will all pull in the same direction and succeed in gaining a common end. Supporters of a "movement" operate in the hopes that the differences among the elements that go to make it up will be subordinated to their agreement on the task at hand. They tend to play down the differences even when they are fundamental and to put emphasis on the current issue where there may be agreement. Their approach is pragmatic and of necessity cannot go beyond the solution of those questions that they think must be answered immediately. Thus, the scope of their thinking is severely restricted to immediate issues without relating these to the over-all solution.

The third position is represented by those who think that the correct way to proceed is through groups doing educational and propaganda work among the masses, dealing largely with issues, and with little or no emphasis on organization. This position is held mainly by writers on political questions, publishers of various periodicals and lecturers who do not affiliate with any special party or tendency. They look upon their role as largely educational and not organizational. Among these elements there are some who occasionally write approvingly of forming a new party but this is rarely done.

In addition to these three tendencies among present day radicals there are, of

course, a number of parties and groups that do not oppose the conception of building a party and are, in fact, putting themselves forward as precisely that party. These are primarily the Communist Party, Progressive Labor Party, Socialist Party, Socialist Labor Party and a number of smaller parties and groups of all kinds.

None of these is a Leninist party either in its program or form of organization. However, this introduction will not try to deal with this group of organizations except in passing. Our task is to justify the attempt to build a revolutionary party of the Leninist kind to present day radicals who have not shown much disposition to affiliate with any of the existing parties. These radical-minded new elements are very often favorable to the idea of fundamental changes in American society; many look upon themselves as socialists. It is necessary to clarify the basic question we have posed: Is a revolutionary party needed to effect the changes that large numbers would like to see and are willing to work for?

The problem must be approached from the standpoint of analyzing the real position of the present rulers in this country who are opposed to any deep-going changes in present day society, and even to granting mild and pressing reforms. To displace them from the power they now hold we must first understand the scope of this power and who holds it.

The American capitalist ruling class is without doubt the most powerful of its kind that history has ever produced. They hold more than half of the wealth of the entire world, dispose of enormous military resources, are able to hold the allegiance of many allies in other countries by one means or another and have been able, up to now at any rate, to prevent large numbers of Americans from casting off illusions about the capitalist system in general.

The repressive apparatus they have, taken as a whole, the armies, police agencies of all kinds, courts and government bodies, are impressive to look at. These are the instruments of state power, as Lenin and other Marxist have explained, which must be conquered and replaced as the central task of a revolution.

In addition to the repressive apparatus American capitalists control there is the propaganda machine, equally impressive, in the form of daily newspapers, television and radio stations and almost all other media of communications. The voice of radicalism, even though more persuasive and louder today than in many years, still has a hard time breaking through the near monopoly of the media enjoyed by the capitalists.

These three features of the ruling class, its economic power, its state power and its ability to monopolize the communications field, enable it to rule, as it does, through a combination of concession and repression. Where the former does not bring results, the latter is available and brought into play.

In addition to the impressive quantity listed above, it must be acknowledged that the quality of the instruments held by the ruling class is of a high order. The ruling power is thoroughly organized and integrated, economically, politically and propagandistically. The whole idea of organization is probably more fully developed in the U.S. than it has ever been in any similar society. This applies not only to efficiency in the field of production, where it is easily visible, but flows over into virtually all aspects of life, including the state power.

If our brief estimate of the power of the ruling class is accurate, and we think it is, the next step is to determine, insofar as this is possible, whether an unorganized, spontaneous movement of the masses, even a huge movement, can succeed in coping with this power and defeating it.

We must bear in mind here that it is necessary not only to remove the present ruling class from its positions of power but to replace its instruments of power with others. It is impossible to see how this can be done by an unorganized mass, without leadership or program. Even if we were to admit that a huge uprising of a spontaneous character can gather enough power to remove the present rulers from their positions, the question still remains, what will replace them? Both problems must be solved.

As a matter of fact, the spontaneist approach not only places a question mark over the first task, the removal of the present ruling class from power, but fails entirely to cope with the second and equally important problem of reorganizing society along socialist lines. This approach is in reality an idealistic one, holding out a utopia in which there will be some kind of guarantee against violations of the interests of the masses. It is impossible to realize the desired goal with such methods. In fact, history does not give us a single instance where a revolution was made without an organization. The organizations have differed from one revolution to another but in each case some organization was present, provided a program and gave leadership, and won a majority to its views to take power. It must be that way in the future too, especially in this country.

As Cannon has written in his The

First Ten Years of American Communism,

"...the transformation of society, which alone can make real freedom possible, cannot be achieved without organization, and that organization signifies discipline and the subordination of the individual to the majority."

Next, there is the "movement" approach. Many of the same objections apply to this as to the spontaneist. In addition, there is the problem that the various parties, groups and tendencies that go to make up a "movement" are usually in disagreement on almost everything, particularly the idea of how to win power. Experience shows that it is difficult enough to bring the various elements together even on a single issue, such as the Vietnam war. To expect enough agreement from all or most of the participants on much more complex and fundamental questions is another utopia. Just as history has not provided a single example of a revolution without an organization in the leadership, we also have no example of an alliance of many organizations cooperating in such an enterprise. It seems that one of the laws of revolution is that the various tendencies that are in opposition prior to the shift in power, whether represented by parties or not, at the critical stage go over to the old ruling class or stand aside, with one exception: the genuine revolutionary party.

The example of the May-June uprising in France in 1968 is quite revealing in this respect and a brief look at what happened there can be instructive. The parties that represented a parliamentary opposition to DeGaulle went over to his side from the beginning. That includes the Communist Party, the Socialist Party and the various capitalist parties. The much smaller parties and groups that led the students were made up of the elements we are discussing. The spontaneists, who were prominent in the first days, soon played out their role and were subsumed in the mass uprising. The "movement" idea, which seemed to have substance as an alliance, soon broke apart under the impact of events. Some of the small groups decided, at one stage or another, to stand aside. Only the genuine revolutionary tendency, in this case the Trotskyist, saw the struggle through to the end, particularly through the events that followed after the uprising had subsided, a period that has still not exhausted its possibilities.

Partisans of the "movement" idea as contrasted to the party often bring forth another argument that should be discussed at this point. This is the idea that a party is not necessary, that some other form of organization can do the job. The example of Cuba is often mentioned in this respect. It is claimed that the Cubans, organized in the 26 of July Movement as a military force proved capable of over-

throwing Batista and winning the power. This is incontestable but it is necessary to take a closer look at what this movement really was.

The military portion of the 26 of July Movement is far better known because its most prominent leaders participated in that field and also because the organization's members and sympathizers in the cities had to operate in secret. However, they did have members in Cuba who were not part of the military forces and some were even located and working for the cause in other countries, raising funds, arranging for ammunition and supplies to the fighting force and so on.

But this still does not tell us what the basic nature of the 26 of July Movement was. The fact that it was able to put military forces in the field, that these grew stronger and ultimately won a victory somewhat screens the fact that it was also a political organization with a program and leadership. Its program was the overthrow of the Batista regime and the formation of a new democratic government; its leadership is well known. Even though the program underwent extensive changes after winning power, it did have a program during the struggle, sufficient as it turned out to win extensive support.

In other words, the Cuban Revolution was led by an organization, of a specific kind to be sure, that had a definite leadership and program. The Cuban Revolution was not made either through spontaneist methods or those of an all-inclusive "movement."

But it is also necessary to compare Cuba with the United States, if one is to decide whether a party is needed here. The Cuban ruling class was a typical semi-colonial power, that is, dependent economically, diplomatically and militarily on the U.S. It had very little in the way of resources of its own. Moreover, it was thoroughly discredited with its own people, without popular support. This ruling class can hardly be compared with that of the United States whose resources we described earlier. It remains only to draw the conclusion from these facts that if a political organization with recognized leaders and a program was required in Cuba, such an organization, in the form of a Leninist party, is 100 times more necessary here in America.

The example of the Russian Revolution is very clear on this point. There were many parties that opposed Czarism. After the overthrow of the monarchy and the formation of a provisional government, only the Bolsheviks stood in opposition, later allied to the Left Social Revolutionaries. The latter joined the first Soviet government which was headed by Lenin and Trotsky. However, the alliance

between the Bolsheviks and Left Social Revolutionaries did not last very long, a few months or so, when the Bolsheviks were left by themselves to carry the responsibilities of leadership in fighting the Civil War and reorganizing Russian society.

None of the other left wing parties and groups gave them any support. As a matter of fact all of them turned up in the various counterrevolutionary camps or stood aside.

The idea of a "movement" rather than a party was extensively tried right here in the United States in the years prior to the 1917 Russian Revolution. The old Socialist Party, which included in its ranks everything from hundreds of preachers and ministers to genuine revolutionary workers, was organized under the conception of an all-inclusive party. But in the final analysis the right wingers succeeded in driving the revolutionists out and converted the party, which had resembled a "movement," into a reformist organization.

The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) was originally organized in 1905 as a merger of three tendencies, represented by such outstanding leaders as DeLeon of the Socialist Labor Party, Debs of the Socialist Party, and Haywood of the Western Federation of Miners. It attempted to be, in part, both a party and a union. In many ways it resembled a "movement," although living in a single organization.

The alliance of these tendencies did not last very long. Within a few years the elements that came together to form the IWW went their separate ways. But the organization continued to exist under the leadership of Haywood and St. John. It made many singular contributions to the American revolution that Cannon writes about in a special section of his The First Ten Years of American Communism.

The author writes that the IWW played a pioneering role as the first great anticipation of the revolutionary party. He says, "This conception of an organization of revolutionists has to be completed and rounded out, and recognized as the most essential, the most powerful of all designs in the epoch of imperialist decline and decay, which can be brought to an end only by a victorious workers' revolution. The American revolution, more than any other, will require a separate, special organization of the revolutionary vanguard. And it must call itself by its right name, a party."

The third category we have listed is composed of journalists, commentators and publishers of radical material. Their opposition to forming a revolutionary party is more implicit than explicit. That is, they eschew a party more by not helping to form one, by standing aside so

to speak, than by open opposition. As a matter of fact, some of these occasionally write favorably about the idea of forming a new party without being specific about it.

It goes without saying that these elements, who by their own choice do only educational and propagandistic work, cannot lead a revolution and do not look upon themselves as people who are obliged to do any such thing. Regardless of the quality of their writings, which is very uneven, mostly bad, we cannot look here for leadership for so difficult a task as the revolution poses.

We must now proceed to our original task, that is, to review the writings on the revolutionary party by its principal American participant and leader. In so doing, we will at the same time get various estimates of other political currents that contested and some that still contest for hegemony and influence among radicals.

Even though many self-appointed radical spokesmen who identify themselves as "New Left" are strongly inclined to write off the political parties that have been on the scene for years, these latter elements are of importance in at least one respect. They have shown a certain ability to keep alive despite unfavorable objective conditions. Although this process has been very uneven, with the fortunes of various organizations shifting in one direction or another, they are all still around and must get serious consideration from everyone interested in the question of the American revolution.

The "New Left," on the other hand, principally represented in the 1960's by Students for a Democratic Society, is a shambles today after a very brief period of existence. Other tendencies of a similar kind, those who published the pretentious journal Studies on the Left, for example, are not in any better shape. The failure of these people may be ascribed in large part to the fact that they refused to learn anything from their predecessors. They tried to operate as though the American revolution was something that they had discovered a few years ago and that everything that came before them was irrelevant. They could not have made a greater mistake.

### The Program

Running like a red thread through all of Cannon's writing is the importance of the program for a revolutionary party. Without a correct program any organization, no matter what its other merits, is bound to come to grief. The program is decisive in the long run. It must be based upon scientific, that is, real objective considerations. It must be elaborated with proper connections to the

past, with the experience of those who came before. It must, also, be correctly attuned to the actual needs of society, to the future. It must be put so that its current application, at any particular time, has meaning for those who are expected to adopt it and work for it.

The program must be based upon class struggle ideas. This means that all serious political conflicts are expressions of the struggle between classes and have no real meaning apart from them. No matter how this is concealed from time to time, and it is kept out of sight by the ruling class as much as possible, this is what is at the bottom of all political, economic and social conflicts.

Cannon stresses the idea that the program must be an international one and that national narrowness of outlook is not sufficient for modern times. Despite the political division of the world into separate nations and groups of nations, the interrelations of all compel the analysis to be international in its scope. The correct beginning is on a world scale. From this the various national conditions flow. Each nation is dependent fundamentally upon the totality of world conditions; none exists as a closed-in entity that can determine its own fate outside of the international complexity as a whole.

The highways of the world are strewn with the corpses of those political organizations that tried to operate in violation of these fundamental requirements for a revolutionary party. It is only necessary to take a look at the many defeats of revolutionary uprisings since the 1917 Russian Revolution to confirm the fact that in almost all cases the failure to advocate a correct program, based upon the above considerations, was the main cause.

In the American experience, Cannon writes of the first ten years of the Communist Party that these ideas were not well understood and led to permanent and unresolved factional fighting within the party. This sapped the party's energies to a large extent and finally led to a three-way split in 1928-1929.

It is instructive to note, as the author explains, that the fate of the Stalinist and Lovestoneite tendencies that emerged from these splits was sealed when they did not work out a correct program for themselves. The Lovestoneites simply disappeared from the scene while the Stalinists continue to persist to this day in all kinds of false and self-defeating programmatic activities that have discredited them among the radicals of the present time.

It is the program that makes the party and not the other way around. Of

course, it appears on the surface as though it is really the party, the individuals that make it up, that determines a program. But this is only the appearance. There is a dialectical relationship between the party and its program in which these two elements, subjective and objective respectively, mutually influence one another on many levels of development. The program attracts attention and builds the party, determines its nature and assures its viability. Without the program, the correct program, the party would be nothing. The critical thing is the program. In the long run that is decisive.

### The Form of Organization

Next to the program, the most important question is the form or organization of the party. Cannon's writings on this question are rich in experiences and lessons to be drawn. Lenin was the first to elaborate the organizational basis of the party as democratic centralism. This was adopted by the early communist movement in America and has been consistently followed by the Trotskyists.

The term democratic centralism has been under attack in recent times, largely by people who have not bothered to find out what it really is. The reason for this is that they think this is the form of organization used by the Communist Party now and they want nothing to do with that. One can hardly blame them for this. However, democratic centralism, which seems to be a contradiction in terms, is not really so complicated as all that it has been made out to be. Neither is the real thing some kind of obfuscated doctrine designed to trap inexperienced people into supporting things they are opposed to.

In actuality this organizational principle provides for democracy within the party in the process of discussing its problems. Once the decision has been made, the emphasis shifts to centralism in action. The way it works out in practice is that the entire party participates in democratic discussions and decision making. If there are differences of opinion, the majority view becomes that of the party as a whole and the party enters the field with the majority program. The minority must be subordinated to the majority; that is the real meaning of democracy; the majority decides. The minority waits until the events themselves confirm one program or the other and for further opportunity to bring its views before the party. The party cannot conduct its work with two programs.

Cannon's works are very rich in examples of how the organizational principles based upon democratic centralism actually worked out in practice. There are many examples in these books, particularly of attempts to overthrow these principles in favor of all kinds of innovations

that may be all right for discussion circles, talking shops and debating societies but are no good for revolutionary parties.

### Tasks and Perspectives

After the program has been adopted and the form of organization to carry it out has been decided upon the most important question that faces the party is what its tasks should be. Cannon tells us that even with a correct program and organizational concepts it is possible to make serious errors if the party does not set for itself realistic goals. The experience of the Trotskyist movement is rich in this respect. It is often very difficult, if not impossible, to learn from books just how to work out a party's perspectives at any particular time. Nevertheless there are many rich lessons from the past recounted by the author that give good guidelines on how to proceed on this problem.

Cannon writes of numerous examples of disputes within the party around such questions and how they were finally resolved. These range all the way from differences in the days just after the Trotskyists were expelled from the Communist Party in 1928 over whether to pay primary attention to the CP membership or to appeal directly to the mass of the workers, to differences over mergers with other political parties and groups.

These differences were of a tactical nature but they were very important for the future of the party. Wrong decisions on what the party should do next, a problem that is always present, can lead to expending energies and resources in fruitless activities. A party that makes enough mistakes in deciding where and how it should carry out its work can wear itself out and disappear from the scene. On the other hand, a party that correctly chooses what to do can, despite unfavorable conditions, win adherents and grow in influence.

One example of how not to answer this question may be found in those elements in the antiwar movement who keep trying to convert it into a multi-issue and amorphous "movement" despite the obvious successes it has had as a single-issue alliance. The antiwar movement has already compelled one president to retire from politics and has mobilized more and more people to oppose the war openly in demonstrations in the streets. It is self-evident that this is what should be done on an increasing scale. Nevertheless, certain opponents of this policy insist upon changing this course for another that cannot possibly achieve anything. In trying to force their policy upon the others they are making every mistake in the book, including packing meetings where decisions are made, ignoring the desires of the

majority of those who have organized most of the participants in the demonstrations.

Another example is in Students for a Democratic Society where the leading lights of the three main factions were all sick with ultraleft and sectarian idiocy. Their policies ranged from open confrontation with the police, with the aim of galvanizing the masses into revolution, to abstention from the real, living struggle. Advocates of the former managed to bring out a few hundred adherents for a confrontation in Chicago in October, 1969 and resulted in a rout of the Weatherman faction of SDS who sponsored this ill-conceived adventure. The abstentionist policy is advocated by the Maoist Progressive Labor Party which now controls the only organization still retaining the SDS name after the three-way split in SDS. They have no truck with anyone who does not produce pristine pure proletarian credentials. In this way they do not participate in the antiwar movement at all and not much is heard from them in the way of "proletarian" activities either.

Letters from Prison is an excellent example of how the party's tasks were approached and what solutions were proposed by the leadership. Cannon, as well as the rest of the top leaders of the party were in jail serving a little over a year for their conviction under the notorious Smith Act. They had to make their influence in the party felt through the mails and under the restrictions imposed by the prison authorities.

Despite these disadvantages the proposals in the letters clearly reveal that the opportunities opening up during this period (1944) were well understood and that the steps that were urged upon the party were correct. The party was pressed to take advantage of every opening, to expand the press, to recruit and, in general, to move forward in all directions. These were correct proposals for the period which was one of growing radicalization at that time in the unions.

In contrast to this period it is important to note the one described by Cannon in the chapter "Dog Days of the Opposition" in History of American Trotskyism. In this period the Trotskyists were isolated and opportunities were few and far between. The perspective was to hang on. Revolutionaries must know how to act in both kinds of periods.

### Attitude Towards the Unions

Cannon's writings teach a good deal on the correct attitude of the party to the union movement. In the earliest days the Communist Party incorrectly tended not to work within the existing unions. This was changed to a policy of working in the AFL and bore good results. After the expulsion of the Trotskyists the Stalinized



CP went into its ultraleft Third Period and tried to organize "Red" trade unions outside the AFL. This proved to be a disaster. The Trotskyists, on the other hand, in their early activities worked in existing unions but understood that this was not their main work. They first undertook to gather their cadres and this could be done only from the ranks of the Communist Party and its periphery.

Later, when this task had yielded certain results the Trotskyists were able to intervene in union struggles, especially the historic Minneapolis Teamsters' strikes, with great effectiveness. In Cannon's writings some of the richest lessons are in how the party influenced these great class battles, how it worked out its policies and the innovations Trotskyism introduced into labor struggles for the first time.

The lessons of the Minneapolis experience stood the party in good stead in the years that followed. There has been very little confusion among Trotskyists on the trade union question since those years because of the lasting quality of what was learned at that time.

#### Attitude Towards Oppressed Nationalities

The best of Cannon on the question of oppressed nationalities is contained in a special section in The First Ten Years of American Communism entitled "The Russian Revolution and the American Negro Movement." This is especially instructive as it describes the origins of setting straight the attitude of American revolutionaries on this question.

Cannon describes how the radicals viewed the Black struggles in the years prior to the Russian Revolution and how the Soviet leaders, particularly Lenin, influenced American thinking and finally changed it in a correct direction. The author explains the wide influence that Communist Party activity had in this field, even after the Stalinist degeneration had begun, among many elements in American life that had no idea where the origin of new policies and outlooks were to be found.

The thinking of pre-World War I radicals and socialist ranged all the way from white racism to looking upon the aspirations of the Black with sympathy but without giving the question independent status. The best positions of those days merely considered the race problem as one that would be solved by socialism; they viewed the Black question as part of the working class question and not a special one with its own validity.

The lessons of the Russian Revolution changed all that, changed it decisively and for the better. Just as these lessons apply with special emphasis to the

Black struggle for liberation today, they are pertinent for the other minorities in this country who are all bringing their demands to the fore, the Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Native Americans and Orientals.

#### Attitude Towards the Youth

The current radicalization among the youth is the largest and most widespread that has ever been seen. But it is not the first. Cannon's writing on this point is largely about the youth of the 1930's; how the party adopted its position on the young people in the Socialist Party milieu and what was done to influence and recruit them.

The author also deals at some length on the further evolution of this grouping, after it had come over to Trotskyism. This part of the development shows us the weak as well as the strong points among the youth. Also of importance is the role of the Communist Party in the youth field and how this tendency, by far the most numerous, misused the young people it recruited and finally demoralized them and lost them altogether. Today you can easily run into many graying people, some of them occupying comfortable posts in unions, who will tell you about their youthful foolishness in the Young Communist League. But the reality is that these were their best days, even though their activities were badly deformed by Stalinist conceptions.

The Trotskyist youth movement never achieved mass proportions but it did make enough headway in this field to draw some valuable lessons for the present and the future. At any rate, today's developments that show the Trotskyists much stronger among the radicalizing students than the Stalinists, even growing stronger than any other single tendency day by day, can be traced to what was learned in earlier times.

Much the same can be said about the movement for women's liberation, which is just getting started now and which has already attracted the attention of a good many young women.

#### Attitude Towards Civil Liberties

A good deal of attention is paid by Cannon to the question of civil liberties. What is involved here is not just the rights of Trotskyists, which have been defended as a matter of course. What we are dealing with here are the rights of others, or opponents. Most of what the author has to say on this point is contained in the volume Letters from Prison written when he and other leaders of the Socialist Workers Party and Minneapolis Teamsters were jailed as the first victims of the notorious thought-control Smith Act.

The correct attitude of one radical

tendency towards another that is under attack and whose rights are in jeopardy has a long history in America. Cannon participated in many of the better known cases beginning with the pre-World War I days. During the first ten years of the Communist Party Cannon headed International Labor Defense, the organization that defended all class war victims. Most prominent among these were Sacco-Vanzetti. His experience in this field qualifies him to speak with authority.

The guiding rule that Cannon emphasizes is "an injury to one is an injury to all." This was generally accepted among radicals and socialists prior to the appearance of Stalinism on the American scene. Thereafter, everything was turned upside down, culminating in the disgraceful performance of the CP in supporting the Smith Act prosecution of the Trotskyists.

The Stalinists abandoned the idea that everyone's constitutional rights must be defended. They went over to the policy of defending only their own people, either ignoring others or actually joining with their persecutors. This self-defeating policy was later modified by the CP but only after a considerable amount of damage had been done.

The importance of correct ways to proceed in matters of defense policies cannot be over-emphasized. This is particularly true for the present time when the capitalist class is running rampant in its persecution of Black Panthers and other opponents.

#### The Intellectuals and the Workers

The relations between intellectuals and workers in the revolutionary party is of special importance at the present time when many students and instructors are coming into or close to the party. The problems arise when better educated and more facile intellectuals, coming from academic backgrounds and petty bourgeois (middle class) origins, find themselves in the same organization as workers who are less educated, formally. This has been a complex problem in the revolutionary movement since the time of Marx and Engels.

Within the experience of the Socialist Workers Party some very rich lessons have been learned on how to approach this problem and how it must be resolved. In his Struggle for a Proletarian Party Cannon contributes what must be considered the classical example of both the problem and the solution. One of the lessons to be learned is that this problem cannot be solved by mechanically sending all the students into factory work as some in SDS tried to do not long ago. Neither can it be solved by sectarian political formulas such as Progressive Labor serves

up. Even less useful is the manner in which the old Socialist Party was led by its intellectuals while the workers and functionaries did all the work.

The SWP has survived more than one attempt on the part of disoriented petty bourgeois elements to overthrow its Marxist program and destroy its proletarian form of organization. In dealing with these events from the most fundamental standpoint the author has contributed many rich lessons for the present generation.

#### Relations with other Parties and Tendencies

The relations between the revolutionary party and other parties and tendencies who look upon themselves as socialist or communist is a complex question. Marx and Engels had to deal with it in a special section of the Communist Manifesto which was the first programmatic statement of the modern revolutionary movement. Since that time the question has become more complex. Cannon's writings on this point, which is included in all his books, is instructive on what these relationships should be.

The most important antirevolutionary tendency in radical circles is the Communist Party. Its politics are governed from top to bottom by Stalinist conceptions adapted from time to time to the exigencies of the moment. Just what Stalinism really is and where it came from is one of the most important political questions of the revolution. It is extremely urgent for all revolutionaries to understand this question to the bottom even though they may have already eschewed Stalinism and the Communist Party. In fact, it is impossible to cope successfully with any important political question of international significance without a deep understanding of Stalinism in all its forms.

Cannon's writings on this question begin with his experiences both in the early CP and with the Third International headquartered in the Soviet Union. He was a delegate to many international conferences held in Russia during the first ten years of American communism and writes both as a participant and leading partisan in the events.

The problem of how to deal with Stalinism and its American representatives was not finally resolved by the expulsion of the Trotskyists from the CP in 1928. In fact, it had just begun. Throughout the four books Cannon deals with this question time and again. What finally emerges from this writing is a complete analysis of Stalinism from an international standpoint as well as its American expression. It is absolutely mandatory for revolutionists to study this material carefully, if they are to make their way in the complexities of the political field.

Among other things it becomes clear that Stalinism is by no means the natural outgrowth of Leninism. Cannon describes the Communist International and the attitude of the Lenin-Trotsky leadership in the early days, up to about Lenin's death in 1924, as contrasted to what followed under Stalin's influence. Those who have been educated to think there is little or nothing to choose between Leninism, Trotskyism or Stalinism have a great deal to learn.

### Reformism and Centrism

Two tendencies in socialist and radical circles that command attention, even though neither is strong here at the present time, are reformism and centrism. Cannon writes exhaustively on the Trotskyist experiences with both. Most of this experience was gathered just prior to the entry of the Trotskyists into the Socialist Party and during their little more than a year in that organization.

The centrist tendency, one moving to the left, was represented by the American Workers Party, led by the late A.J. Muste. How the Trotskyists reacted to the appearance of this party is instructive from the standpoint of attitude, on the one hand, and determination, on the other, of the direction of a political movement. The Trotskyist and Muste parties effected a merger which was a highly progressive step for those times, reversing, as Cannon points out, a long period of splits in radical organizations.

Later, after entering the Socialist Party, another centrist tendency was encountered, this time one that was moving to the right. This experience and the policies worked out are fully dealt with and explained.

Another tendency encountered in the Socialist Party, led by the late Norman Thomas, was reformist in its politics. To them the achievement of socialism was looked upon only as a series of reforms of the capitalist system. Cannon deals at some length with the struggles that broke out in the Socialist Party and the political questions that were in dispute as well as the conflicting organizational ideas held by the various tendencies. Of particular interest is the evolution of the centrists caught between the revolutionary wing on one side and the reformists on the other.

### Sectarianism and Ultraleftism

If the present day radical milieu finds the reformists and centrists not much in evidence, the contrary is the case with two other tendencies, usually found together, sectarianism and ultraleftism. There are probably more different kinds of ultraleftism around today than at any

other time in the entire history of American radicalism.

However, they are not the first examples of this kind. In his time Lenin devoted a book, entitled Left Wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder, to this question when ultraleftist tendencies appeared in the Communist International in a number of countries. The early American CP suffered from this disease and only cured itself of it with Lenin's help. Cannon tells the story of how this was done.

Another ultraleftist grouping took form in the Trotskyist organization in the early 1930's when the previously mentioned merger with Muste's party came up for discussion and decision. This group was led by Hugo Oehler, a talented mass worker who fell victim to the sectarian disease. The group first opposed the merger with the American Workers Party and then split over the decision to enter the Socialist Party. Cannon fully describes what happened during these struggles and draws the lessons from the experience.

The proper approach to ultraleftism in general is pertinent to the present day varieties of this disease. Cannon insists it is a disease. Today's ultraleftists have not invented a single new thing, if we disregard the absolutely crazy way in which they carry out their ideas. In fact, there was one tendency among them that was honest enough to call itself by its right name, The Crazies. The present antics of the ultraleftists are somewhat different from those of prior times but their fundamental outlook is the same. Therefore, both the analysis and the cure are much the same.

### The Prominent Individuals

One of the very valuable parts of Cannon's books is the description of virtually every individual who was prominent in American radicalism all the way back to the early years of this century. With almost all of them, the author had personal political experience in one organization or another.

A special section is devoted to Eugene V. Debs, the most effective spokesman for socialism in the days prior to the Russian Revolution. This article describes many of Debs' contributions to the cause but also deals with his shortcomings.

"Big Bill" Haywood, leader of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), with whom Cannon worked closely both in that organization and later as a communist, is introduced to the reader as one of the great figures of American radicalism.

The early leaders and founders of the Communist Party as well as those who replaced them in the Stalinist period are

thoroughly examined, including those who are mentioned in the writings of the Stalinists.

Marching across the pages of Cannon's books are all kinds of other people, most of whom the present generation of radicals does not yet know. It would be fruitful to make their acquaintance, however, because in almost every instance each of them represents a type that appears and re-appears in radical history.

There is very likely no other place where one can find a capsulated account of

so many kinds of individuals who were at one time or another prominent in radical circles, who marched and some who dragged their feet across the stage of American history and who left something of themselves, for good or ill, in the movement.

There is much else in these four books that is valuable to the present day revolutionary. A study of this material will equip the reader with a good deal of knowledge that is necessary and even indispensable for making the American revolution.

\* \* \* \* \*

WORKS BY JAMES P. CANNON IN PRINT

Available from National Education Department, SWP:

"Defending the Revolutionary Party and Its Perspectives" -- speeches by James P. Cannon relating to the Cochran split in 1953. Price, 50 cents.

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