

Opinions of the Left: A writer who has recently resigned from the Communist Party gives his own impressions of the history, present, and future of American socialism.

U. S. Socialism Today and Tomorrow

by Joseph Clark

TWO items in the news after the off-year elections tell us what has happened to the socialist Left in our country. After twelve consecutive terms in office Jasper McLevy was defeated by a Democrat in Bridgeport. The victor charged the Socialist was "too conservative." On New York's East Side, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Communist leader and veteran of over half a century in labor and civil liberties struggles, received 710 votes for the city council. She was the only Communist candidate anywhere and the party concentrated its efforts on her campaign. The myopia behind the move to make a sacrificial offering of her is a sad story in itself, too dreary to relate.

For the present, socialism has disappeared as an organized force in our country. The Communist Party is gasping its last. But, like its historic forerunners—the Socialist Labor Party, the Socialist Party, the IWW—it may never be interred. Radical organizations that have outlived their day in the U.S. have a way of hanging around in a kind of frozen, sect-like status. This is not to suggest that the socialist tradition has been unimportant in our history. There was a significant Socialist Party. The Communist Party also made a lasting contribution to the American scene. Right now, however, for any practical purposes, the Socialist and Communist parties have ceased to exist.

Neither the Socialist nor Communist parties were ever mass parties. Nevertheless, there were periods when they sparked the progress of the labor movement and left an important mark on political life. For the Socialists this came mainly with the Debs movement in the decade of 1908-1918. For the Communists it came primarily with the democratic-front movement in the decade of 1935-1945.

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The high-water mark of direct Socialist influence came in 1912. That year Socialist Party membership averaged 118,000. Debs, who was and remains a revered figure in our history, received 900,000 votes for President. This was nearly six percent of the total, the largest percentage ever attained by a socialist party in presidential elections before or after. One motivating reason for the "era of unusually progressive politics," says David A. Shannon in his history, was the influence of the Socialist Party.

American Communist Party membership reached 80,000 on the eve of World War II. Though the C.P. never got a significant vote in national elections, Communists played an important part in the organization of the mass production industries, especially through the CIO. The historic struggle for Negro integration has some of its origins in Communist-inspired campaigns for the freedom of the Scottsboro boys and in the Herndon case. Communists pioneered for social legislation later realized through the Roosevelt New Deal. In the depths of the depression the AFL leadership spurned the notion of unemployment insurance. It was then, as Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. writes in "Crisis of the Old Order" that "Unemployed Councils, set up by the Communist Party, agitated, often to good effect, for better conditions in relief centers, for the stopping of evictions, for unemployment insurance."

The Socialist Party was reduced to a sect in the thirties when it refused to acknowledge anything progressive in the New Deal on the domestic scene or collective security internationally. The Communist Party espoused these and, emphasizing the politics of coalition, gained influence and became the main bearer of the radical tradition.

BY the end of the war the CP had some 75,000 members and considerable leadership in left wing unions with some million members. Now, my guess is that the CP is down to four or five thousand members. No one will dispute its complete isolation from the unions and the Negro integration struggle. An official guess by party leaders places membership at the 8,000 figure. But this, they admit, is not based on registration or dues payments. Even the four or five thousand in my guess include many who don't pay dues or attend meetings. But it's a sad sign of the demise of *all* socialist organizations that the present CP membership is larger than that of all other



socialist organizations and grouplets combined. The Socialist Party-Social Democratic Federation, even after their merger, has at best some 1,500 members. The Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party and its split-off, the Shachtman Independent Socialist League, together number under a thousand. All these groups compete with the CP in what often seems a race for the prize in dogmatism and sectarianism.

Most CP members left the organization before it was rocked by the Khrushchev revelations. About 60,000 quit between 1945 and 1955. Another ten or twelve thousand left since then. It would hardly be fair to say that this disintegration was due solely to wrong policies and mistakes. The bulk left during the period of witch-hunt. But there were courageous men and women in the CP who stood up to McCarthyism. Then, they likewise left the party when they saw it was no longer a vehicle for progress and socialism. Of those who had remained in the party during the worst of the Smith Act and McCarran Act persecutions many left *after* the fall of McCarthyism began to lift and when the Supreme Court began to restore the Bill of Rights.

Unquestionably the impact of the Twentieth Congress revelations about how communism had degenerated under Stalin played a major part in the final disintegration. But the CP had already been doomed. Its demise was of a piece with the decline and death of the Socialist Party, the Socialist Labor Party, the IWW. It wasn't and couldn't have been persecution alone that wiped out the party. Other revolutionary organizations have survived equally savage persecution. But there was a special quality to the isolation of the CP from the working class. It had to be experienced to be fully appreciated. A small incident, which illustrates this, comes to mind.

It occurred during the depths of the McCarthyite miasma. A janitor, who had toiled about a quarter of a century in the only underground he ever knew—the subway station—was fired by the city administration in New York. His daily task could hardly be called very sensitive. He cleaned the filthiest, most abused toilets in the city of New York. But the august power of our great city dismissed this worker because he was suspected of membership in the Communist Party. He had been a charter member of the Transport Workers Union. And we should recall that the union was built originally with considerable initiative by the Communists. Many of its leaders had been Communists or Communist sympathizers. The rank-and-file, who numbered few Communists among them, didn't fear the Red label. They used to cheer their leaders when they declared: "We'd rather be called a Red by the rats than a rat by the Reds." The left-wing leadership was re-elected again and again. Time passed. When the "subversive" janitor was fired no one protested. Not a peep was heard from the workers. Communism and Communists had become anathema. The silence was more deafening than the noise in the subway at rush hour.

THE isolation of the CP was a foredoomed result of the reorganization of the party which followed the publication of the Duclos article in 1945 and the subsequent removal of Earl Browder and his expulsion from the

party. Whatever the faults of Browder he had a remarkably clear insight about the possibility and significance of peaceful coexistence between the Communist and capitalist states in the post-war world. This issue transcends all others in the atomic age. It was therefore a disservice to American Communists and an early sign of disastrous changes in Stalin's foreign policy outlook when Duclos wrote in his April, 1945 article ridiculing Browder for declaring "in effect, that at Teheran capitalism and socialism had begun to find the means of peaceful coexistence and collaboration in the framework of one and the same world. . . ."

A measure of how Stalinism distorted Marxism came in the second instance of Duclos' meddling in the affairs of the American Communist Party. In his letter to the last national convention of the CP Duclos wrote that proletarian internationalism "implies solidarity with the foreign policy of the Soviet Union." This caricature of Marxism was offered nearly four years after Stalin died. It was the kind of policy of subservience which resulted in apologetics for the Moscow trials, which prevented support for the anti-Hitler war in 1939, which defended the Rajk, Kostov and Slansky trials, rationalized and excused the destruction of Jewish culture in the Soviet Union, supported the campaign against Yugoslavia, and in an earlier period, adopted the awful theory of "social-fascism" which helped grease Hitler's path to power. (The rejection of any united front by the Social Democrats at the time and their apologies for the "legality" of Hitler's advent to power made them equally culpable.)

Duclos' second letter was too much for the CP convention. The Foster group which tried to get the convention to endorse the Duclos ukase was voted down. Unfortunately, the convention lacked the courage to make a forthright repudiation of Duclos, especially in respect to the phrase quoted above. The American Communist Party went further than any other Communist Party in rejecting Stalinism. After receiving "greetings" from John Williamson in London inferring the need of re-electing Foster as chairman and Dennis as general secretary, the convention voted against electing officers and decided in favor of committee leadership. But this was all too little and too late. The latest crisis in the affairs of the CP was but a climax of a steady process of decomposition. And this was related to the general setting within which *all* socialist organizations have declined in America.

The two periods of relative success for socialist movements—1908-1918 and 1935-1945—were both marked by a minimum of dogmatism and a maximum of application to the specific American scene. The Socialists of the earlier decade had room for a right wing, a left wing and a center, for Christian socialists and populists, for workers, middle-class members and intellectuals. The Communists of the later decade had room for militant New Dealers and orthodox Marxists and they began to grope towards the concept of a coalition path to socialism as well as to immediate reforms.

Still, the promise of both decades was never realized. In both parties and in varying forms, dogma triumphed over reality. It seems to me the nub is that no socialist movement in this country ever *persisted* in a search for

what Engels called the "singular road" that Americans would travel to socialism. Engels added it would be "an almost insane road," in his letter to Sorge of September 16, 1886. It would appear insane, assuredly, to those who substituted the letter of Marxism for its method. An application of its method would start from facts—including the facts of America's productive development continuing in the epoch of monopoly, the facts of American democratic tradition, the facts of a new technological revolution with automation and the splitting of the atom, the facts of how American labor exercised political pressure, often successful pressure, through one of the two corrupt capitalist parties, the facts of a higher standard of living than that of workers anywhere—facts which contradicted Marxian notions of increasing poverty, facts of the welfare state attained under the Roosevelt New Deal, paradoxical facts of continuing monopoly control and increasing influence of organized labor.

IT is not a disparagement of Marxism to agree with Engels' letter to Sorge (September 16, 1887) "that the Americans, for the time being, will learn almost exclusively from practice and not so much from theory." Or Engels' letter to Schlueter (January 11, 1890): "The American workers are coming along all right, but just like the English they go their own way. One cannot drum theory into them beforehand, but their own experience and their own blunders and the resulting evil consequences will bump their noses up against theory—and then all right. Independent peoples go their own way, and the English and their offspring are surely the most independent of them all."

The builders of any new socialist movements in America should be willing to realize that American workers have come along pretty well so far. They have won the highest standard of living of workers anywhere. And their "stiff-necked" and obstinate British cousins have come along pretty well too, what with their Labor Party and its vital left wing, and with the civil liberties they have preserved which make American and Russian witch-hunts look miserably medieval. Perhaps, as the editors of the *American Socialist* suggested, we can learn from the career of Britain's Keir Hardie. G. D. H. Cole furnished much food for thought in his article on Hardie in the November *American Socialist*. Cole noted that Hardie "made it easy for men and women to transfer their allegiance from liberalism to socialism without too sharp a break in their ways of thought and action." If American workers are to exercise more independent political action their present allegiance to the Democratic Party is a factor to be reckoned with. Cole also points out that Hardie "gave priority to support of trade union action and to political pressure for improved conditions under capitalism, which could be displaced only at a later stage and could in his view in the meantime easily afford to grant improved standards of living to the bottom dogs." The experience of American labor seems to tally with that kind of approach.

Nor need such seeming moderation mean a de-emphasis of socialism. When Samuel Gompers still had some socialist sentiments he expressed a thought which may appear

to enshrine reformism but which contains more than a hint of the relationship between reform and revolution. Gompers said in 1890: "The way out of the wage system is through higher wages." What has marked the past efforts of socialists and communists in America is the failure to win any appreciable number of workers for socialism. Perhaps a closer study of the relationship between increasing welfare, increasing power for labor, increasing wages and social benefits, and problems of public ownership and control, will ultimately yield more fruitful results for socialist theory in our country than the orthodox studies of the past. It requires enormous pressure and struggle for workers merely to maintain their relative share of the national product. Perhaps an effort which increases this share can shake the foundations of private monopoly power. In any case a new socialist movement will have to come out of the ranks of labor and its struggles. It will have to be immersed in the labor movement.

If Soviet socialism has never been a model to spur American socialism there is a way in which the Soviet Union is already influencing the course of American politics. Those sputniks up in space have done far more to shake things up here than all the Comintern cables and Duclos letters of the last forty years. Even Administration demands for integrating American schools have been voiced out of fear of what "Soviet propagandists" will say if we segregate our colored children. Peaceful competition between the Soviet Union and the United States may be the condition out of which American socialism will become a necessity. How else carry out a greater advance in science, improve living standards, integrate the races, surpass the Russians in training engineers, beat them in things that count—education, health, social welfare, per capita production—and freedom? How prevent the Soviet Union from overtaking and surpassing us in the material things and also in the things of the spirit, in freedom, above all—which the Soviet people can attain only through their own successful revolt against Stalinism—except through democratic socialism?

RECENTLY there have been faint glimmerings of a new kind of search for that "singular road" to American socialism. The ferment and discussion that came with the revolt against Stalinism within the CP has encouraged and given new life to publications such as *The American Socialist* and *Monthly Review*. *I. F. Stone's Weekly* is crusading in the spirit of American radicalism. A recent book, "American Radicals," shows a surprising number of radical and socialist teachers in the colleges and the book itself contains useful digging into the American radical tradition. The American Forum for Socialist Education has sparked discussions as has the Committee for Socialist Unity. These are still tiny manifestations against the background of a labor movement in which socialism as such plays no part today. The present is not, from all indications, a period to launch new organizations. This is a time for dialogue and discussion, for study and reflection. It is also a time for all who believe in socialism to contribute whatever is in their power to the labor movement and to the struggle for Negro integration that is bidding to change the face of American politics.