

Socialism and the Elections---2.

By MAX GORDON

IN A LETTER to a reader in the March issue of Monthly Review, Leo Huberman, editor of the socialist periodical, writes that both major parties are equally reactionary and represent the "class enemy"; and that any effort to build a non-socialist third party is a "waste of time."

He thus counsels the reader to steer clear of all electoral activity, except that which agitates for socialism.

We said yesterday that Huberman's emphasis on the need to educate for socialism is well-taken. But the political tactic he proposes is in our view, self-defeating. While we've had occasion to discuss this several times in the past, we'd like to raise just a couple of fundamental questions here regarding this tactic and its relation to socialism.

When one examines the history of social change, one is struck by the fact that it comes about as a result of movements that start as a demand for reform, for a "redress of grievances." At a particular stage this demand for reform passes over into a movement for a change of society.

The demand for reform and the pressure for a fundamental change of society both spring from a common source—the evils inherent in the existing society. And the movements for correction of grievances is generally a coalition of those who want reform and those who are more far-sighted, who see the ultimate need for social change.

OUR OWN American revolution started as a movement of reform against the abuses foisted on the colonies by the British crown. In its early stages, a small handful—men like Sam Adams and Ben Franklin—believed the solution lay in independence. Because the mass of colonists did not think so, this handful conducted its agitation for independence quietly.

It participated in, and gave

leadership to, the struggle for reform. As the struggle for redress of grievances advanced, the circle of those who saw the need for independence widened.

At a particular stage in the struggle—around 1774 and 1775—the demand for independence emerged as a mass demand of the movement which had started with the aim of "redressing grievances."

Similarly with the struggle for abolition of slavery, the "Second American Revolution." Did not most abolitionists ally themselves with those who merely wanted to halt the spread of slave power in the Republican Party of 1860? Was not this a coalition of abolitionists and non-abolitionists, even anti-abolitionists, which developed around a non-abolitionist program to check the slave power? And did not the success of this coalition, at a particular stage, lead to abolition though this was not the party's program?

THE EXPERIENCE of the world workingclass movement, which we cannot discard or ignore, reveals that socialism is not brought about simply by agitation. It must merge with the economic and political struggles of the workingclass. It can only be achieved as the workingclass advances through these struggles and learns from its experience.

These political struggles include elections. Irrespective of the fact that the politicians of both major parties are representatives of Big Business, the conflicts and struggles within and between the parties do reflect the clash of varying class interests, including that of the workingclass. Certainly, workingclass pressure has helped to shape candidates, programs, issues.

At this stage of the political struggle, workers, Negro people, small farmers still consider the electoral battleground a major one for "redress of grievances." A worker in a shop who stands aloof, or a Negro who refuses to

have anything to do with a campaign for increased Negro representation, is in a poor position to convince his fellow workers or fellow Negroes of the benefits of socialism.

HUBERMAN PROPERLY advises his correspondent, Jean R., to be active in fighting on specific political issues. But he errs, in our view, in sharply separating electoral activity from this struggle for peace, civil liberty or economic progress. To paraphrase a well-known dictum, elections are the continuation of the political struggle by other, and more intense, means.

Were not the results of the 1954 elections a severe blow to McCarthyism? Did not the struggle against McCarthyism dictate, then, participation in these elections? And are not socialists vitally concerned with the defeat of McCarthyism?

Has not the course of the pre-nomination struggle for president within the Democratic Party been changed by the intervention of the people on the historic issue of civil rights? Have not many Democrats been forced to abandon their early emphasis on party unity, on keeping the issue out of the election, as a result of massive popular pressures?

The question here is not whether Adlai Stevenson or Sen. Estes Kefauver are "liberal" candidates, to be trusted by the people. It is whether the people, in the course of the primary and election struggles, can compel the candidates to make concessions to popular demand. If they are to help give leadership to the people in exerting this pressure in the most effective direction, socialists must themselves be active in these electoral battles.

To abstain from these electoral battles would have meant abstention from vital struggles against McCarthyism in 1954. And in 1956, it means abstention from vital struggles against segregation.