

WHY THEY 'MISUNDERSTOOD' THE COMMUNIST PARTY CONVENTION

By H. W. BENSON

Not many commentators understood what was happening in the American Communist Party last year. It had been plunged into a deep crisis first by the 20th Congress and then by the Hungarian events; a bitter internal dispute showed that the party was split into irreconcilable tendencies with one group genuinely taking steps away from Stalinism. It might seem odd that so few were willing to notice it.

Now we have the abridged, but comprehensive, text of the proceedings of the 16th National Convention of the CP held February 9-12. It was here that the fight was momentarily patched up and the differences temporarily resolved in the name of party unity. A reading of this 351-page book only gives a limited picture of the true situation in the party, only a poor hint of the depths of the internal divisions.

The Communist world, still dominated by Stalinism without Stalin, has its own reasons for deliberately misunderstanding the situation. Everywhere, the Communist Parties are eager to restore the old balance; to overcome the world crisis without making fundamental changes; in fact, to pretend that there never really was a crisis at all.

But in the United States, Stalinism was shattered and the national CP torn apart within. To maintain the myth of world Communist unanimity and unity, it is necessary to misread and distort the meaning of the fight in the CPUSA and the results of its recent convention.

What made it possible for world Stalinism on the one hand and many of our own anti-Stalinists on the other to underestimate the significance of the fight in the CP was the fact that the basic differences were not highlighted but were slurred over at the convention.

In the *Daily Worker* on June 4, Alan Max finds it necessary to correct the record.

Accounts of the CP convention in the United States had been published in *Pravda*, in *L'Humanité*, in the British Communist press, and in various Latin American publications. Max discovers one curious common element in all these reports: "All these accounts seem to have one thing in common," he writes, "a lack of familiarity with the proceedings of the convention."

In the March issue of *International Affairs*, an English-language periodical published in Moscow, he discovered that the Russian reporter, T. Timofeyev, had made the identical error in his account of the February convention. Max felt impelled to write an Open Letter in reply.

MOSCOW VERSION

Timofeyev's conception of the convention is a simple one. He reports the rise of a "revisionist" and opportunist "right wing" in the party and he reports with satisfaction that it was overwhelmingly defeated. His "revisionism," of course, refers pseudonymously to the Gates tendency. The convention victors, in his view, were no others than the defenders of "Marxism-Leninism," a euphemism for Stalinism.

A few excerpts reveal the mood of his report:

"In recent months, the situation was aggravated by revisionist and right-opportunist elements who tried to utilize the party's policy of overcoming past left-sectarian mistakes to put forward the liquidationist idea of converting the party into an amorphous 'political association.' There was also a proposal to organize a 'mass party for socialism' into which the Communist Party would dissolve. The revisionists urged the rejection of a number of basic Marxist-Leninist principles. They also put for-

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ward a policy implying departure from the principle of proletarian internationalism."

We remind the too trusting reader that "proletarian internationalism" is a synonym for an utter dependence upon the Moscow line.

"The firm Marxist-Leninists in the U.S. Communist Party resisted the revisionist and liquidationist moves," says Timofeyev, adding later:

"The hopes of reaction, which on the eve of the convention claimed that the CP was facing a 'split' with most of its members advocating 'rejection' of the principles of Marxism-Leninism and proletarian internationalism were shattered. . . Differences which had earlier come to the fore were resolved. Party unity was strengthened on the basis of Marxist-Leninist principles."

It is with obvious satisfaction that the Russian writer looks at his world movement: "Everywhere, including the United States, the Communists are repulsing the attempts of the reactionaries. While overcoming past mistakes of a dogmatic and left-sectarian nature, the Communists in the Western countries are at the same time vigorously opposing revisionist and liquidationist tendencies."

HITS BACK

Alan Max, of course, objects to all this; for he interprets the convention quite differently. He insists that the convention endorsed a new approach and chides Timofeyev for not mentioning it; he quotes from a resolution unanimously adopted by the new National Administrative Committee that spoke of a "new course."

"But where in T. Timofeyev's article," asks Max, "is there a single word about 'the extremely sharp turn which the Party is now making'? Where is there the slightest indication of any 'new course' or of what the *Political Affairs* editorial calls 'this new, creative approach and broader understanding of theory'? Or the *Political Affairs* estimate that 'in abandoning the earlier idealistic and uncritical attitude towards the lands of socialism while recognizing their historic role and achievements, the party has strengthened its ability to promote true proletarian internationalism? Where is there the slightest hint of the party's new approach to Social Democracy, or of the convention reply to Jacques Duclos of France?'"

Max hopes, finally, that when the printed proceedings reach *International Affairs* it will correct its estimate. "Such an account, especially if it remained uncorrected," he writes, could only tend to shake the confidence of your readers in the ability of your journal to give sound political estimates."

One can understand Max's dissatisfaction and sympathize with his remonstrances. But he must face one question that remains after a thorough reading of his "Open Letter."

If we omit its distinctive Stalinist slant, the "wrong estimate" of International Affairs is shared by virtually every important ideological tendency in the United States with the exception of a few radical sects. Why?

The common conception, or misconception if you like, is that the CP remains today just what it was yesterday. If this thought is prevalent within the Communist "family," can one be surprised to find that it dominates public opinion in the United States, not merely

among bourgeois right-wingers but among liberals and laborites as well?

We turn now to some aspects of the proceedings not only for the facts but also for the source of the misunderstandings.

SLURRING OVER

(1) *The Main Political Resolution:*

• Reprinted in a lengthy appendix, the main political resolution was finally adopted at the convention almost unanimously, with the votes of the leaders of all three groups. Summing up his views Foster referred to all the main convention documents:

"And I must say that I have voted for every one of these documents, that I have been present when they were adopted, and as far as I know, there were no others that I would vote against."

One may dig deep into the resolution and perhaps find many things that Foster should reject, but the fact is that it became the basis for unity at the convention and for slurring over all differences. The proceedings show, too, that it was this unity, not the real differences among the tendencies, that was underlined.

This stands in sharp contrast to the pre-convention discussion. In the months before the convention, the Draft Resolution became the starting point for a vigorous debate, for a presentation of a tentative but clearly anti-Stalinist line, for an attack upon the apologists for Russian domination. It is true that all this was not wiped out at the convention but it was minimized.

In the pre-convention period there was a line of division, apparent to all, between those who endorsed Russian intervention in Hungary and those who opposed it. But there was only incidental references to Hungary at the convention, in almost every case snide attacks on the critics of Russia.

The differences, then, emerged in the debate on the Draft Resolution; they were submerged in the adoption of the Main Political Resolution at the convention. The resolutions are fundamentally the same but the debates were different.

(2) *"Right-opportunism":*

The party wing led by Gates which had really begun to move away from Stalinism was labeled a "right-opportunist" current by the party Stalinists. Neither Foster nor Dennis wanted a head-on fight with Gates; their moral standing was not high enough at the height of the party crisis. But they attacked "right opportunism"—Dennis anonymously, and Foster by referring to Gates by name.

But in the atmosphere of unity, the Gatesites remained silent.

In a dozen different ways the convention inserted one little amendment after another to the Main Resolution denouncing, rejecting, and warning against "right-opportunism." In the context of the party situation, this was and could only be an attack on the Gatesites, a setback for them and a step backward for the party.

FOSTERITE GAINS

(3) *"Left-Sectarianism":*

The convention agreed that "left-sectarianism was the main danger and the source of all the main 'mistakes.'" In the pre-convention period, some party members presented the raw truth. They insisted that the party had been isolated because it had come forward as an apologist for a regime in Russia which had been exposed as a regime of police terror. But nothing much was heard of this at the convention.

"Left-sectarianism" was portrayed as nothing but a series of individual extremist "mistakes" which derived, in part, from a mechanical application of a line accepted unthinkingly from abroad. Yet it was not this which broke the party's spine but the fact that in all its tactical moves "right" or "left" it came forward as the defender of a tyrannical government in the name of "socialism"; thus it defamed socialism and isolated itself at the same time.

The fight over "left-sectarianism" and

"right-opportunism" came to a head when opposing reports were submitted by William Schneiderman, for the majority of a Resolutions-subcommittee, and by Esther Cantor, a Fosterite, for the minority.

Schneiderman said that "this sharp division of views dealt with the line and the content of what this discussion is all about." And he emphasized: "without attempting to impugn the motives of any comrades who make amendments or such proposals, it is known to this convention and the whole party that there is a current which is fighting to reverse the main direction of the draft resolution."

In her report, Esther Cantor demanded that the resolution be sharpened up in its rejection of "right opportunism."

The convention listened to what Schneiderman had called a basic difference and instructed the Resolutions Committee to try to bring in a unanimous report on the question—which it did. The final compromise agreed that left-sectarianism, not opportunism, was the main danger, but that the party had to struggle on "both fronts" and it repudiated "existent right-opportunist tendencies."

It may have seemed like mere word-juggling to some. But it represented little successes of the Fosterites in stemming the tide of anti-Stalinism and in cutting away at the Gates wing.

FEW SPOKE UP

(4) The replacing of the party by a "Political Action Association" was rejected by the convention.

We knew this fact before the proceedings were printed. In the pre-convention period, the proposal was vigorously advanced and strongly defended. But we know now that it was not defended at the convention itself by more than a word.

These aspects of the convention, and others, demonstrate what the mood of unity meant in practice. It is true that the Duclos letter was repulsed; that Foster was not able to restore the status quo; that the Stalinists could not turn the party back to the old mold. But every advance in thinking had been made before the convention in the pre-convention debates.

Foster did not win. But he and those who agreed with him on fundamentals were able to stop the movement away from Stalinism and to stall the political development of the party members.

One delegate, Bob of New York, voted against a section of the Resolution:

"... it does not sufficiently explore one of the major factors responsible for our errors, both to the right and left throughout our history, and that is, a fundamentally incorrect conception of proletarian internationalism. . . . Proletarian internationalism means that if we believe in and support the Soviet Union and socialism, we must speak out against every Soviet policy, whether domestic or foreign which hinders socialism in the world."

But this voice, still speaking from the standpoint of one who believes that Russia is socialist, was a lone one.

Delegate William Mandel was alone too in speaking against the inclusion of Foster and Dennis on the new National Committee. "These two men," he said, "have lost all possibility of respect of this party. . . . The American people will never regard as independent a party marked in the slightest degree by the presence of such leaders or by half-way statements on such policies, if that is the future assured by this convention."

In the period since the convention, the party at best has been standing still. Of the executions and jailings in Hungary we have heard not a word. In New York the Fosterites make progress.

But now, at least, Alan Max speaks out against one Russian interpretation of the convention. It is not a move that can have far-reaching consequences in altering the attitude of American radicals toward the CP. Perhaps it can become the starting point for a new definition of views inside the party.