

On the War Danger

by Martha Stone

DURING THE CURRENT discussion on the Dennis report, some comrades ask: Is it true that the Party overestimated the war danger? Was not the statement of John Foster Dulles that the country was at the brink of war, proof of the fact that our analysis was after all correct?

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The debate in the Party is not as to whether there was a war danger. The debate is not around the question of the character of American imperialism. I believe there is general agreement on these questions. There was a war danger, fomented by the big monopoly interests in our country. American imperialism, reactionary in character, was bent on world domination and war. First under Truman, then under Eisenhower, the foreign policy of our government developed a cold war program that lasted ten years. And for a period, the U.S. was in a hot war in Korea. Of course there was a war danger. There would not have been a world peace movement if the masses had not seen a real danger of atomic war.

The question under review is: what was the actual relationship of forces at various stages of the struggle? Were we correct in placing the war question from the point of view of its imminence?

To answer that question, we must not only re-examine Party resolutions, articles, etc., but must look in the field of practice, how we viewed given issues, how we acted among the masses, and what were the effect of our actions upon them.

THE RELATIONSHIP OF FORCES

While the peace and democratic camps emerged victors in the post-war period, it was not a foregone conclusion that they would win permanently, or would be able to realize the policies of peaceful co-existence. This issue—war or peace—could only be decided in the daily struggles of the masses, against the reactionary monopoly circles threatening world atomic war.

To have relied solely upon the newly won positions of the democratic camp would have been a serious error, for the imperialist forces that threatened world peace had great strength and resources at their

disposal. Through the Truman doctrine, the Marshall plan, the program to re-arm Western Germany, the atom bomb, the fifty-billion-dollar war budget, the formation of NATO and SEATO, they pressed their policies of world domination.

Our Party can rightly be proud of its role of opposition to this infamous bi-partisan foreign policy. Our conclusion that this policy could only lead our nation into disgrace in Europe and Asia, and our pressure for a return to FDR's policies of negotiation and peaceful co-existence, were important contributions to the American people and the world peace fight.

During the ten-year period of the cold war, there were times when the war danger was greater, and other times when it lessened. The criticism of the National Committee that we overestimated the war danger, is based on the fact that around specific phases of struggle in the fight for peace, our analysis of these concrete situations was not well grounded in the realities of world relations at the time.

To give one example: U.S. military involvement in Korea was a critical point in the international situation. Had the North Koreans and Chinese forces not succeeded in bringing about a military stalemate in that war, the danger of the war spreading would have been greater. But within a short period, U.S. policies in Korea encountered tremendous obstacles. The words uttered at the

U.N. in support of U.S. policies were never backed up by the material support the U.S. demanded of the "allies." World public opinion turned against this war. In our own country the demand for peace forced Eisenhower in the 1952 election campaign to promise a settlement of the war. It became clear that the war forces were blocked, the preventive war crowd suffered a defeat and the mass demand for an end to the war received ever-greater support from the American people.

The war's end in Korea and Indo-China marked an important turn in the international situation. It brought the policy of peaceful co-existence closer to realization. The gap between the drive of imperialism to world war and its ability to carry out such a war, became ever greater. We did not address ourselves to this growing gap. We concentrated mainly upon signaling the danger of war.

ON WAR'S "IMMINENCE"

The Party's program written after the tension around Korea and Indo-China had come to an end, placed the war question in the same manner as we did in 1950 when the war first broke out. In fact, in the past six years, there were tremendous new developments, such as the movements in the colonial countries leading to Bandung, the new role of the neutral nations, the new initiative of the Soviet Union in the field of foreign policy, and the growing

sentiment for peace in our own country. We took note of these developments. But we drew wrong conclusions from them. We concluded that as a result of these victories, the war forces would become desperate and more adventuristic, and the war danger would be greater. This had the effect of spreading fatalism in our own ranks and sowed great doubts about the correctness of our position that peaceful co-existence was possible. This theory—that victories for peace increase the danger of war—ran contrary to the facts of life. For the “preventive war” grouping—the McCarthys, Knowlands, Eastlands, etc.—suffered a great defeat. The Eisenhower Administration had to shift its position toward negotiations. Dulles, too, had to make important tactical changes, climaxed by the Berlin conferences and by Geneva.

This placing of the war question at all times as though war were around the corner, played into the hands of those forces who were shouting that war was “imminent” and “inevitable.” This was profitable propaganda for the men of the trusts. As long as the American people believed this, big business could justify the arms program and rake in big profits. If we Communists had not erred in overestimating the war danger ourselves, we would have been more effective in influencing the American people to reject these sabre-rattlers with their

bluff and bluster. We would have been more effective in dispelling their “gloom and doom” outlook. The way we placed the question of the imminence of war, tended to give credence to the war-scare headlines.

I distinguish here between those dangers that were real at the time of Korea and Formosa, from the impression war-mongers tried to create with their blustering talk of the imminence of war. I do not believe that we were at any time during this whole ten-year period on the brink of war. The capitalist class, while planning for war, was increasingly running into obstacles to the realization of its plans. Dulles' declaration of the “brink” should not become our analysis of the war situation. Dulles often reflected the line of the more war-like groups in both parties, but when the mass pressure on an international scale made itself felt, and the Eisenhower Administration shifted its position in the direction of negotiations between East and West, Dulles' practices were also altered by the struggles of these peace forces against war.

BIG BUSINESS AND WAR

Wars are not caused by “incidents” or “warmongers” or “adventurers.” Such people, expounding the viewpoint of given classes in society, have a bearing on the policies of the ruling class. But imperialist wars grow out of the economic and political policies of big business in its

effort to regain lost markets and to stop the growth of the socialist countries. We sometimes place the question as though capitalists take to war lightly. This is not true. U.S. monopoly found alternatives in its drive for profits and domination short of war. It would certainly be wrong to draw the conclusion that the U.S. only suffered setbacks and defeats and scored no victories during these cold-war years. The cold war program brought to the coffers of big business exorbitant profits in arms production. Capitalism still had much room to maneuver from an economic point of view to realize these profits without war. From a political point of view, too, U.S. corporations met with some successes. The policy of "containment of Communism" contributed to bolstering the reactionary forces in the governments of France and Italy. It helped stem the Leftward tide among the war-weary millions in these countries. It played a like role in some countries in Latin America, as Guatemala.

Another example of this overestimation of the war danger was the way in which we described the division in monopoly circles. We said the monopolies were divided into a "war now" and "war when ready" groupings. This could lead to only one conclusion: that inevitably the imperialists would wage war. It did not correctly describe the differences in the ranks of big business. For

as the peace forces became more vocal here at home, and contradictions sharpened on an international scale around the issues of NATO, SEATO, Formosa, Indo-China, etc., the "war now" grouping began to reflect these international pressures. For example, the Hearst press interview, the idea of a shift of U.S. policy to peaceful co-existence, was advanced by one of the foremost war forces in the country. Then there was General MacArthur's speech in California, in which he advocated negotiations with the Soviet Union. There were differences between Knowland and McCarthy around Formosa.

We saw the monopoly groupings in our country as a united war group and did not utilize differences and contradictions in the ranks of the capitalist class to the advantage of the working class and the nation as a whole.

While we advocated a policy of peaceful-co-existence, in reality we felt a great deal of doubt and hesitation about it. This doubt was further fed by the position of our Party program in 1954, which said that a change in foreign policy was possible only with the defeat of the Eisenhower Administration. We spoke a good deal about peaceful co-existence, but our actions led people in and around our movement to believe that war was imminent, and rendered them ill-prepared to meet the new and rising develop-

ments that brought about Geneva. That is why the Geneva Conference came as a big surprise to most of our Party and leadership, and there was such reluctance in our ranks to recognize that we were embarked on a new world situation, the beginning of the era of peaceful co-existence.

TACTICAL ERRORS

Our inaccurate analysis of international developments led to some tactical mistakes in our peace activity. While it is true that tactics flow from theory, it would be oversimplification to say that once we correct theoretical errors, this will automatically correct our tactical line. It is conceivable that we might have erred in estimating the war danger and yet have avoided some of the tactical errors we made—such as the manner in which we pressed our point of view in the CIO. I believe if we had treasured the Marxist-Leninist principle of being linked with the masses of workers under any and all conditions, we could have avoided many of the errors in our trade-union work that cut us off from the labor movement.

The mastery of tactics is an art in itself, and embodies many principled questions. For the purposes of this article, I would like to show how our errors in overestimating the war danger influenced our mass work adversely.

Reacting to issues of foreign policy from the point of view of the imme-

diately danger of world war, we then exerted pressure on our trade-union comrades to stand up and be counted in their local unions. What could be worse than an atomic war, we reasoned; and in that atmosphere we pressed our members to criticize foreign policy irrespective of their ability to rally workers behind them. We became pre-occupied in our trade union work almost solely with this question of foreign policy to the exclusion of other issues that roused the labor movement (fringe benefits, taxes, social welfare, and legislation). In fact, for a long time our Party neglected its most basic task, concern for the economic problems of the working class. Seeing this question of the imminence of war as a central question, we threw everything we had into this struggle to the neglect of other issues. We felt this was necessary because the threat of war was so close. The fact is that, had we given equal attention to the issues workers were occupying themselves with, we would have done better in winning them for the struggle for peace, as these questions were also related to the cold war program.

For a number of years, from 1947 to 1952, we rejected any concept of developing united front movements around candidates backed by labor and liberals on domestic issues. Our yardstick for judging candidates became their attitude on the peace situation. Since all candidates went

along with the cold war program, this automatically ruled out coalition activities with them and the masses who followed these leaders. While the source of this error can be found in a sectarian approach to our electoral work, it is also true that our overestimation of the war danger pressed us to approach our tactical line in this manner.

This further influenced our judgment of the contributions the American people were making to the peace struggle. Viewing war as imminent, the mass activity of the American people to resist war seemed way off base to a great section of our Party. While it is true that the level of struggle here was not of the same scope and quality as that in Europe and Asia, nevertheless, the American people made important contributions to this world-wide peace fight. But we did not fully appreciate this because we were judging the movement from the point of view that we were on the brink of war. Under such conditions, delegations to Congressmen, postcards, letters to the press, etc., seemed to us to be at a very low level. We pushed more advanced slogans, created Left centers, and hoped to attract the peace-loving masses of American people in this manner. In reality, the American people reflected their peace sentiments through their own organizations, and in a manner that corresponded to their level of understanding.

In our Party, there were a number of comrades who recoiled completely from the task of exposing the predatory and war-like course of U.S. imperialism, and of helping the American people resist the reactionary foreign policies advanced by Truman and in 1952 by Eisenhower. This tendency to capitulate in face of the witch-hunt that got the support of the top leadership of the trade unions and mass organizations, had to be fought. But the lesson for our Party is this: we could not overcome such Right opportunism, correct such errors, by fighting a Rightist line with a "Left"-sectarian position. The errors we made fed such Rightist tendencies. It made it impossible to struggle successfully against Right opportunism, to strengthen and correct such comrades, and help them maintain their ties and connections with the mass movement.

Of considerable influence in committing these errors was the repetition in our country of the wrong concept held by the Cominform that described the international situation as divided into two camps—the camp of Socialism and the camp of Imperialism. This characterization lumped the large bloc of neutralist nations with the imperialist forces and hindered us from understanding their great potential in the fight for world peace. It also led us to overlook the positive role of the neutralist forces in our own land.

I believe that the errors we made

in respect to the war danger sprang from the fact that after the 1945 convention, when we correctly rejected the Browderite view that monopoly capitalism could play a progressive role, we went to another extreme of a "Left" sectarian character. We described monopoly groups as one homogeneous class, all united in their drive to war. We failed to see divisions and differences in the ranks of the imperialists. I believe that fundamentally our views clashed with the concept of peaceful co-existence. We centered our main fire on the Right danger, while we veered toward a "Left"-sectarian position. Even when questions in the Party, on the increased dangers of "Left" sectarianism, were raised in many districts and in the national leadership, the Party convention in 1950 took note of this growing danger, but nonetheless failed to come to grips with the main mistakes of this whole period.

The draft program came into sharp conflict with previous convention policies and estimates. The result was that many of these differences were conciliated and compromised, and were not basically resolved. The Party program finally adopted itself reflected continued Leftist estimates on the war question.

The April meeting of the National Committee took the first steps towards correcting our political line which it characterized as "Left" sectarian. This was something new for

our Party. For the whole period was marked by a struggle mainly against Right opportunism while the "Left" danger grew. Leftist errors were treated as tactical in character. They were regarded as errors of individuals or a given district. The Dennis report for the first time, despite serious weaknesses and limitations, places responsibility where it belongs. It traces the Leftist errors of this period to our policies as well as in the sphere of tactics. It declares in no uncertain terms that the main danger for our Party has been "Left" sectarianism. This has begun to put our Party on the road of self-criticism and self-correction.

To millions of American people this new era brings the promise of world peace. But peace is not inevitable. The drive for war, inherent in imperialism, is expressed by the continued policies of Big Business to maintain the high armament production, by Knowland and Nixon, the advocates of a hot war, by McCarthy, Jenner, Eastland forces who continue to press their reactionary war aims upon the Administration and the "allies." In the arena of continued struggle, to eliminate all features of the cold war, we Communists can make our modest contribution towards the camp of peace and democracy. Learning from our past mistakes will help us to become an integral part of the life, traditions and struggle of our country.