

The Fight Over the Draft Program:

# THE CP'S TWO WINGS: WHAT DIVIDES THEM?

By H. W. BENSON

As the American Communist Party has wrestled with the impact of the 20th Congress, socialists have watched with interest and concern. Out of the first stage of debate came the Draft Program which became the focus of discussion as the February party convention approached.

It was obvious at the outset that it proposed sweeping tactical changes and viewed the party's recent past with a critical eye. But was it the beginning of a genuine change or was it a camouflage and cover for a continuation of the fundamental line of old?

When the program appeared, that question seemed hanging in mid-air; the socialist and labor public was accustomed to abrupt 180-degree turns in line which left things basically unchanged; they were scornful, too, of fake "discussions" that became nothing more than breast-beating, scape-goat-hunting sessions.

It soon became clear that the National Committee majority which had adopted the Draft Program was divided into at least two sharply divergent tendencies, each of which had voted for the same resolution but for vastly different aims. Since the program was an umbrella covering opposing policies, it could serve only as the starting point for debate; it became a convenient vehicle for raising the key questions, but it could not settle them.

If it quickly became evident that this was a real discussion, in every sense of the word, it was because one wing of the party seriously tried to face up to the party crisis. It saw the Draft Program as a spring board for a new attitude and a new movement; it maintained that the party would founder unless it became democratic—democratic in its inner regime and democratic in its conception of socialism; that it had to be genuinely based upon the interests of the working class and to reject the role of blind apologist.

**A BEGINNING**

It was this group that turned the discussion into a genuine one.

John Gates, editor of the *Daily Worker*, in "Time for a Change" (*Political Affairs*, November) called for a real turn: "This tragic situation cannot be cured by a few patches here and there as we have been doing for many years. It can only be solved by drastic and basic changes."

He rejected "uncritical acceptance of

Soviet mistakes." He pointed out that "the expansion of democracy is not automatic under socialism but must be fought for." He insisted upon inner-party democracy and "the right of dissent after policy has been adopted and while it is being carried out."

Gates is only one among many. They have only made a beginning but it is a serious beginning by people who know that trivialities and clever maneuvers are futile and that without a drastic reorientation they are doomed in the United States.

It was no accident that those who rose to the occasion centered around the *Daily Worker*. Here were the party's public propagandists, the men who faced the non-party public.

They sensed the mood of progressives and union militants who had become suspicious of the party and were deserting it after the 20th Congress. They were eager to drive the lessons home to the party and induce it to make a real turn.

But there are others—others for whom the draft program was not the beginning of a new era but a subtle maneuveristic device, with unruffled equanimity, they were willing to admit a multitude of errors—in the past—so long as they were not required to make a real turn in the future. They imagined that by repudiating the "crimes of Stalin" in his "later years" they could be absolved from the duty of drawing up a real balance-sheet.

They hoped to go on fundamentally as before, with new apologetics and clichés for the old. The working-class public, they hoped, would forgive or at least forget. They sought a "new look" but the old substance; old wine in new bottles.

**THE SKILLED BUREAUCRAT**

No one better represents this redecorated, wall-papered conservative wing than Eugene Dennis.

For a fleeting moment after the 20th Congress, it seemed as though the Khrushchev regime might tolerate, even encourage, a critical attitude by foreign Communist Parties toward limited aspects of Russian policy. The bureaucrat, skilled in the arts and crafts of old-line Stalinism, cultivated a sixth sense that enabled him to anticipate in advance what his higher-ups would appreciate. The successful Stalinist flunkey was one who required not direct orders but only subtle hints. Perhaps Eugene Dennis suspected that his new mentors might welcome a certain line of inquiry. At any rate, he wrote a rather mild note to *Pravda* suggesting that the rise of the "cult" of Stalin needed a deep Marxist explanation.

(Leave aside the pitiful mood of such a query: the most urgent demand put to those who shared power with Stalin is that they think up a cogent explanation for crimes they once concealed. It is as though a murderer's accomplice were called to task, not for killing, but for failing to lecture on the social causes of crime.)

Under the pressure of labor, liberal, socialist, and now Communist public opinion, Dennis mentioned the execution in the USSR of Jewish cultural leaders and the suppression of the Jewish language. *Pravda* reprinted his missive in full, with one deletion; it deliberately cut out all his references to the destruction of Jewish rights!

Months pass. Dennis defers, submissively and politely, to this disgraceful censorship and refuses to raise his voice.

Here is a man, then, who is ready upon command to call out stridently against murder, frame-ups, terror, and tyranny... for the past and upon orders from above. But in his breast stirs not the meagerest hint of audacity, not enough to protest against a mean act of censorship and suppression of the truth. Who will now take him seriously if he begins to speak of "independence"?

**OPENED A PATH**

A short history of the Dennis line is preserved in the *Daily Worker* for December 4. Joe Clark proves in pitiless detail that he never dared to utter a criticism until it came through Russian channels first: "Dennis evidently does not object to the *Daily Worker* criticizing anything said or done by Soviet Communists but only after the Soviet Communists have themselves made such criticism." With perfect accuracy Clark summarizes Dennis: "Dennis... assigns to the Soviet armed forces in Hungary the role which Marx considered fell to the working class."

Yet Dennis and Clark and Gates all support the Draft Program; it is hardly enough to clarify the party line-up. The real line of division lies elsewhere.

While Dennis voted for the Draft, it soon became obvious that he had far more in common with William Z. Foster, party chairman. For one passing, hesitating moment, Foster reluctantly voted for the Draft Program but after rapid calculation changed his mind and his vote. He is against—and properly so from his basically Stalinist point of view.

The Draft is heavily laden with old baggage. But there is little point to a microscopic word-by-word dissection of its political line. Apart from its exact contents it cleared the way for a searching criticism of the party line; it legitimized not only a consideration of secondary tactics and slogans but a new look at some of the most sacred party dogmas.

It opened a path for those who wanted fundamental changes; in particular, for a change in the relation between the party and the regime in the USSR.

That is exactly what those who hang on to the past cannot tolerate. They want not a real discussion but only the appearance of one.

They tolerate a genuine discussion with distaste and, doubtless, would suppress it if they could by bureaucratic machine methods. But since that is not possible in the present atmosphere, they try to smother it with other methods.

**BEHIND THE DIVISION**

Not every supporter of the Draft Program wants a fundamental break with Stalinism; but its opponents, open and not so open, rally round a still-Stalinist line, in politics and in method. The un-questioned leader and organizer of this tendency is Foster, an unreconstructed holdover from the Stalin era whose politics have not budged an inch despite routine disavowals of "Stalin's crimes" especially in "his later years."

The discussion takes place around the Draft, with amendments, supplements, addenda, and what not. But all this serves only as a convenient rallying ground for the battle between the two main tendencies and as a temporary shelter for those who vacillate between them. Convention action on the Draft cannot end the discussion; it only opens a new phase.

Those who have nothing better to do spend their time picking out "revisionist" flaws and "opportunist" deviations in it. In the end, they know no more about the depths of the divisions between the two main tendencies than they did at the beginning. To understand the real scope of the fight in the party, it is essential to turn not to the text of the

Draft Program but to the course of the discussion as a whole.

One group in the party takes form and looks for leadership to men like Gates and Steve Nelson. It is a distinctive tendency; that is, it leans in a certain direction. It is not of one mind on every question; its views are not consistently or fully developed; it has a distance to travel; but its direction is already marked out: toward democratic socialism. On the other side, a truly Stalinist wing clusters around Foster.

Democratic socialism or Stalinism: these are the two main poles. The party must ultimately choose between them. That and nothing less is at stake.

**"RIGHT" AND "LEFT"**

Foster denounces his opponents as "revisionists" when they propose to revise his monstrosities in the field of party policy. He accuses them, too, of representing a "right" wing.

Who is "right" and who is "left?" One can get lost wandering around the points of the political compass; but such direction signs give a rule-of-thumb guide to tendencies in the labor and socialist movement.

If we could find "pure" examples of right and left tendencies, (as we never can in practice) they would be distinguished approximately as follows: A Marxist "left" wing is one which leans toward the independence of the working class and for its establishment as a class organized in its own interests. A "right" wing leans just in the opposite direction, toward the subordination of the independent working-class or socialist movement to other social groupings or their representatives.

In the multitude of questions up for debate, a flood of tactical and strategic divergencies relate to the "American question." Foster has ample scope for his talents. Yet, despite grotesque contortions and outright distortions, no one of the Foster-Dennis camp has been able to demonstrate, or even seriously suggest, that their line represents the policy of independence in American politics as against critics who propose to capitulate to it. In any case, party history refutes any such claim; no line of demarcation has appeared here.

**CLASS ROOTS**

But what does separate the two sides—clearly, unmistakably and admittedly—is their respective attitudes toward the USSR; and differing conceptions of the relationship of the party to it. Foster and Dennis are united in a determination to subordinate the movement in practice. Gates, Nelson, and the *Daily Worker* group, on the other hand, despite the vacillations of their politics, call for an attitude of critical independence from the USSR, and demand an end to serving as blind apologist for it.

Not that they follow out the full implications of their position. Ironically, both they and Foster insist in common that Russia is "socialist"; but the difference in tendency is there nonetheless.

The Gates wing moves toward independence; in that sense, compared to its rivals it is the "left" wing in this dispute.

However, the terms "right" and "left" can be misleading. It would be more accurate to say that the democratic socialist tendency is the working-class wing of the CP, while the Foster group is the "Russian" wing. Their incompatibility arises not simply from differences of opinion but from class roots: the former is groping for real roots in the American working class, while the latter is bound firmly to the bureaucracy of the Russian state.

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