
The Communists Answer

by Jay Lovestone ["R.B. Nelson"]

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The Communists of America are again under fire. This time the attack is made by editors liberated from romanticism and by a group labelled the "Workers' Council" and advertising itself as "fundamentally" in agreement with the Third International.

For the past 2 years the Communist Party of America, Section of the Communist International, has consistently worked for communism. The Communist Party pursued this policy when the future of the Communist International was a matter of speculation, when its foundation appeared to many of its newly-won noisy friends as merely a part of the body politic of Soviet Russia.

Much water has flown under the bridges since. The Second International is dead; the Two and a Half International is a stillbirth; and the Communist International is a world power. Where can a "real" non-romantic revolutionist drift to nowadays? Yes, there is nothing that succeeds like success. The Third International has won a host of admirers who, in deed if not always in word, are guided by the adage "distance lends enchantment." The latter stand outside of and away from the Communist International and shout from the housetops their readiness to join it provided this, provided that, and provided everything else.

In this host of noisy admirers of the Communist International are found a few Left Wing Socialists — the "Workers' Council." This group, lost in its platonic admiration for the Communist International in Moscow, is directing the following attack on the Third International in America, the Communist Party:

(1) The Communist Party of America was not forced underground. It never should have gone underground. The idea of a secret organization "was a part of the atmosphere of revolution and romanticism

that the Russian upheaval had created." Illegality has become for the Communist Party of America the end and aim instead of a necessity.

(2) The Communist International was itself a victim of this romanticism. Today the Third International "no longer dreams of small minorities but demands mass movements" and "has deserted its policy of splendid isolation on the industrial field."

(3) To reach the masses, the underground organization, which breeds a false sense of security and is a menace to the movement, must give way to an open "above-board" Communist Party.

A Little History.

To charge the American Communists with having gone underground voluntarily is as preposterous as it is dishonest. Particularly does this come with bad grace from those who had for years defended the Socialist Party and done all in their power to prevent the organization of a Communist Party in America. The American Communists organized in the open and functioned in the open as Communists when their present critics were romantic enough to attempt proselytizing Hillquit, Berger, and [Algernon] Lee for even conditional affiliation with the Third International. While the "above-boarders" of the Workers' Council were striving to win over the traitorous Socialist Party to a "real, revolutionary international" (whatever that could have meant after 40,000 to 60,000 suspected of being Communists were expelled), the American Communists were openly fighting as Communists and were being jailed for scores of years of penal servitude.

Then came the countrywide raids in November 1919 and January 1920. Thousands were arrested on

the suspicion of merely associating with or being members of the Communist Party. The leaders were jailed, the press shut down, and the headquarters closed up. Despite this persecution, the Communists worked in the open. They fought with their backs to the wall against overwhelming odds to maintain their organization in the open. The Communists were driven to cover for protection and worked underground in order to save their organization. Since then the communists have tried their best to work in the open.

Legal and Illegal Activity.

The secret organization has not become an end in itself to the American Communists. It is not possible for them alone to determine their status. Our capitalists are conscious of the dangers of a revolutionized labor movement under communist influence. The American capitalists have stopped short at nothing to prevent the Communists from getting into contact with the masses. This accounts for the barbarous persecution to which the Communists have been subjected in America and for their being driven underground.

Whatever else may be said of the Communists, whatever mistakes may be charged to them, it cannot be denied that they are fully aware of this purpose of the capitalists. It is evident that they are on the job and preparing to thwart the enemy's plans by getting into contact with the broad laboring masses politically on a national scale.

Illegality has never been an end in itself with the Communists, who are realists and not romanticists like their critics who still have the umbilical cord of the opportunist Socialist Party on their body politic. Though the Communists participate in legal work, they know full well that a revolutionary party must also be prepared to engage in illegal work. The communists reject the idea that the workers must be iron-bound by the rules set down by the capitalist class. They openly announce that they will not for a moment hesitate to send these rules to the scrap heap when the interests of the workers demand it.

In pursuing this policy the American Communists are adhering to the conditions of affiliation adopted by the Second Congress and reaffirmed by the Third Congress of the Communist International.

Says Point 3 of the famous 21 Points: "They should create everywhere a parallel illegal apparatus, which at the decisive moment should do its duty by the party and in every way possible assist the revolution. *In every country where, in consequence of martial law or other exceptional laws, the Communists are unable to carry on their work lawfully, a combination of lawful and unlawful work is absolutely necessary.*" The Workers' Council and all other insistent "admirers" of the Third International are wrong in their beliefs and hopes that a Communist Party can limit itself to legal work.

The Communist International.

Communists do not hide their mistakes. They frankly admit their errors. But our newly-won "communist" admirers are totally wrong when they say the International has changed front at its last Congress. This imputation offered by the Workers' Council group as an apology for its present "fundamental" acceptance of the Communist International shows that these comrades not only were not serious in their last year's endorsement of the Comintern, but that even today they do not fully endorse or comprehend the program of the Third International.

The charge that the Communist International pursued a policy of sectarianism and "splendid isolation from the masses" before the Third Congress or at any time in its existence is entirely unfounded.

At no time in its history did the Communist International fail to fight sectarianism and dual unionism aggressively. The last Congress has only reaffirmed and stressed all the decisions of the first two Congresses. Months before the Second Congress, in 1920, the Executive Committee of the Communist International disbanded the Amsterdam sub-bureau because of the tendency toward sectarianism and dual unionism. The Theses and Statutes of the Second Congress, the policy of Zinoviev (who is persistently attacked by the leading spirits of the Workers' Council as a sectarian and splendid isolationist) at Halle, and the attitude towards the French, English, and Czecho-Slovakian parties show clearly that romanticism, sectarianism, and dual unionism never had a more bitter and more consistently aggressive foe than the Communist International.

Another illusion with which the Workers' Coun-

cillors are burdened is their insistence that the Communist International has, at the last Congress, discarded its former attitude toward the role of the armed struggle and the underground organization in the revolution. The implication is obvious. We are to deduce logically that the “above-boarders” of the Workers’ Council welcome the Third International’s coming around to the position always held by the indomitable Left Wingers.† This contention proves decisively that the recent exiles of the Socialist Party were not in the past and are not even now in full agreement with the Communist International.

One need but refer to the Theses on Organization adopted by the Third Congress, Sec. 54:

The legal Communist Parties of the capitalist countries usually fail to grasp the importance of the task before the Party to be prepared properly for the armed struggle, or for the illegal fight in general. Communist organizations often commit the error of depending on a permanent legal basis for their existence and of conducting their work according to the needs of the legal tasks.... Every legal communist organization must know how to insure for itself complete preparedness for an underground existence, and above all for revolutionary outbreaks. Every illegal Communist organization must, on the other hand, make the fullest use of the possibilities offered by the legal labor movement, in order to become by means of intensive party activity the organizer and real leader of the great revolutionary masses. (Italics ours.)

As to the flippant attitude of our “realistic” Workers’ Councillors towards the protective measures taken by the American Communists, the following excerpt from the same Theses is particularly relevant. Sec. 56:

It is of course imperative for an illegal party to protect its members and party organs from being found out by the authorities, and to avoid every possibility of facilitating such discovery by registration, careless collecting of contributions,

and injudicious distribution of revolutionary material. For these reasons it cannot use open organizational methods to the same extent as a legal party. It can nevertheless, through practice, acquire more and more proficiency in this matter.

On the other hand a legal mass party must be fully prepared for illegal work and periods of struggle. It must never relax its preparations for any eventualities. It must have safe hiding places for duplicates of members’ files; must in most cases destroy correspondence, put important documents into safekeeping, and must provide conspirative training for its messengers.

Reaching the Masses.

The American Communists have never denied that the underground organization forced upon them by the capitalist class is not a means suited for reaching the masses. This is evident, for the Communists are constantly improving and extending their activities. But this does not at all support the ridiculous contention of the “above-boarders” that a secret organization breeds a false sense of security. The secret organization does make it more difficult for spies to operate.‡ There is no labor organization, open or secret, that is perfect in this respect. Every trade union is honeycombed with spies. All workers’ organizations that are up and doing are under strict surveillance by the enemy. In the underground organization the membership is more safe legally and wholesale raids resulting in general demoralization and break-up are prevented.

Besides, the creation of an open, Communist mass party cannot be accomplished by any one act. A Communist mass party can evolve only through a process of long duration. In this process of building a Communist mass party it devolves upon the already organized Communists to take the lead in the organi-

†- Lovestone’s derisive allusion to the Workers’ Council group as “Left Wingers” here refers to the Left Wing Section of the Socialist Party — regarded as an archaic and transitional form of “centrism” to which the Workers’ Council people clung after the split of the SPA and establishment of the Communist Party of America and Communist Labor Party over 2 years earlier. While Jay Lovestone was (rightfully) regarded by his peers in the CPA as being on the “Right” of that organization, the Workers’ Council group that he polemicizes against in this article was in turn on his “Right” — that is, even more oriented towards the rule of law and the use of parliamentary methods of struggle for both immediate and ultimate demands and even less oriented towards agitation for armed struggle and the insurrectionary establishment the dictatorship of the proletariat. The real “Left Wing” in the Communist milieu of 1921-22 was actually represented by the Central Caucus faction, which was in the process of splitting the CPA over the issue of the establishment of a “Legal Political Party” at the time when this article was written.

‡- Despite the arguments of some antagonistic contemporaries to the contrary, I can testify as a historian engaged in piecing together the story from a vast array of underground documents — including frequently befuddled Department of Justice surveillance reports from the period — that it is beyond question that what Lovestone says here is true: the system of frequently-changing pseudonyms, secret meetings, secret correspondence addresses, and codes made the job of the spies very difficult and often stymied them altogether.

zation of the open party. It is the task of the latter to unite the advanced masses into the legal ranks, permeate these masses with a correct understanding of Communism, and firmly establish the ideological and political hegemony of Communism within these ranks. Today the realization of this task presupposes, of course, the maintenance of the Communists' highly disciplined and centralized organization. The report of the Executive Committee of the Communist International for 1920-21 completely substantiates the above position. *"We advised our American comrades that they must not only conduct an illegal party, but that they must also take it upon themselves to organize, despite the White Terror, a broad movement, legal or semi-legal, to work parallel with the Party and strive to enlist the support of larger masses."* (Italics ours.)

Summary.

1. While the Workers' Council constituents were still in one camp with Hillquit, Berger & Co. against the Third International, the American Communists openly worked and fought as Communists.

2. The Communists of America did not go underground of their own accord. They were driven underground and illegalized by the capitalist reaction. The secret organization is to them a matter of necessity and not of choice.

3. The Communists have since made great strides in frustrating the enemy's plan to devitalize their organization by forcing it completely underground.

4. The Communist International not only never advocated sectarian and splendid-isolation policies but at all times insisted on the creation of broad, mass parties and fought aggressively against sectarianism and dual unionism.

5. The anxiety of the "Workers' Councillors" to agree "fundamentally" with the Communist International because of its supposed new position shows clearly that our Left Wing Socialist comrades were not in the past and are not even today ready to accept fully the principles and tactics of the Third International.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport.

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