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Editorial Staff

David P. Berenberg

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The Socialist Youth Movement

ARTHUR G. McDOWELL

TWENTY-ONE years ago this May the National Committee of the Socialist Party set about federating the scattered young peoples groups of a socialistic inclination, into a national organization. Much as the Socialist Party organizationally has been rebuilt practically from the ground up since 1927, so the present Young Peoples Socialist League dates from around the beginning of 1929. Not until then had the Socialist Party recovered sufficiently from the steady decline that followed 1919, to extend the aid in terms of finance and personnel which alone makes possible a youth movement of any sort.

The first appearance of the Young Peoples Socialist League was coincident with the beginnings of the Socialist Youth Movement internationally in 1907. The initiative came from younger party members and resulted in the establishment of groups in both Chicago and New York in May of that year. At the Socialist Party Convention at Indianapolis in 1912 it was decided to recommend to party locals that they aid and encourage the formation of Young Socialist Leagues "for the purpose of educating our youth in the principles of Socialism—and that this education be combined with social pleasure and athletic exercise."

In the fall of 1913 the National Executive of the party set up the "Young Peoples Department" with Joseph Rogers of Chicago, as the first secretary. A survey revealed 42 distinct local Leagues "professing a belief in the logic of Socialism." Large city leagues existed in four or five cities, Rochester boasting 500 members, Los Angeles 800, New York 400 and Chicago and Buffalo only slightly less.

The League grew rapidly from 1914 on. A perfected constitution was adopted by referendum vote, William Kruse of New Jersey was elected as national secretary and promptly

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appointed as Director of the Young Peoples Department by the party. The American League had kept in touch with the provisional International Socialist Youth organization, established by the Berne conference of Young Socialist groups in 1915 in an effort to reconstruct shattered Socialist Internationalism and unify opposition to the continuance of the World War. The young people felt that their young European comrades were gloriously brightening the pages of the history of international socialism so blackened by the weak-kneed surrender of the main section of the Socialist International in 1914.

The 1917 convention adopted the historic St. Louis declaration on the entrance of the United States into the World War, and pledged the socialist movement to resist that war. The YPSL with its 157 circles and 5000 members gladly rallied to that courageous program and felt the bitter brunt of war-capitalism's suppression. The national secretary was indicted for seditious activity. The year 1919 saw the youth movement, together with the rest of the socialist movement, reach its peak and start on a disastrous decline. In a futile attempt to prevent the bitter factionalism attending the communist split, the Socialist Party in its 1919 Emergency Convention in Chicago altered the semi-autonomous relation of party and youth movements to make the YPSL completely independent. The first YPSL national convention was held in Chicago shortly thereafter and the secretary demonstrated the sharp upswing in revolutionary sentiment in reporting an enrolled membership of 10,000.

This was the last report indicating a growing socialist youth movement made for a decade. The national secretary chosen by referendum vote to succeed Kruse (who had resigned to serve his sedition sentence) secretly joined the Workers Party (Communist). He was ousted when discovered, but called a convention in his own authority where a majority voted to turn the League over to the communists.

For ten years the shattered YPSL led a precarious existence. Momentary revivals were followed by collapse. For lack of funds conventions were postponed and abandoned.

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The National Executive committees designated by conventions to give responsible leadership never met for similar reasons. The party promised aid which never came.

Early in 1929 a reviving youth movement first found expression in the East, where Greater New York YPSL members took the initiative in the formation of an eastern district organization. The party was moved to appoint a sub-committee of the NEC which reversed the tradition of the past ten years by proceeding to secure both funds and a national director for the League in the person of Frank Manning. This was the beginning of a new socialist youth movement.

Following a crisis in the affairs of the organization late in 1931 precipitated by the resignation of the then national secretary, the YPSL was finally restored as a department of the national office of the party. At the party national convention in Milwaukee in 1932 the YPSL was declared to be "part of the Socialist Party". The party undertook to pay the salary of a full time national YPSL secretary and set aside a definite part of the party dues for YPSL work.

At the sixth national convention of the YPSL in Cleveland in the late summer of 1932 a new constitution was adopted which marked several changes. The age limit was lowered from 30 to 25, and relations with the party were set forth in detail. The obligation of YPSL members over 21 immediately to join the party was established. The seventh convention in 1933 went further by recommending to the 1934 party convention the admission of members at 19 if they have been in the YPSL two years. This is a recognition of the party's need for the services of younger trained people in part, but also is meant to discourage the tendency to make the YPSL a "Youth Party". In addition, two new national functionaries were created, an educational and an industrial director. The duty of the industrial director, according to the report of the organization committee, is to encourage members of the YPSL to become active in the economic struggles of the working class and to supervise these members in their activities in trade unions, unemployed groups, etc.

It has been the tendency for the socialist youth organiza-

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tions to recruit only the better paid and better educated of the working class youth. These elements have tended to interest themselves in self-education and cultural matters rather than in politics or trade unionism. Most of the activities of the YPSL of America, 1913-1919, likewise came under the head of education and social programs.

Surveying the American social scene in 1932, the YPSL found that there had been an intensive development of organized recreation under the auspices of churches, settlement houses and the public schools and colleges, since the war. This was in addition to the vast machinery of commercialized sport and amusement under the sponsorship of interests bitterly hostile to everything the socialist movement stands for. It is not too strong to paraphrase the old Marxist dictum by saying that in America "Sport is the opium of the people", particularly of young people.

Under such changed conditions, a movement built up so markedly around "social pleasure" as the pre-war YPSL had been, was not a practical possibility. The generalized idealistic and intellectual appeal characteristic of the YPSL in the years of reorganization not only gave the movement a very narrow group to build on permanently, but meant an overwhelming proportion of students as seen in '32. A healthy desire to appeal to the youth in the working class as well as to train YPSL'ers in the methods of leadership of "struggle organizations", was behind the establishment of the industrial secretariat.

The national executive committee chosen at the Cleveland convention chalked up several accomplishments to its credit. A national paper, the Challenge, was launched and firmly established as the official organ of the movement with a steadily, if slowly, growing circulation and influence. The newly founded educational department under Gus Tyler produced the first of a series of serviceable outlines for educational work. The industrial department definitely directed the interest of the youth movement toward organized labor, and prepared the members for active participation in the trade union organization drives that followed the NRA, and in

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which the YPSL did at least its proportionate part to reestablish socialist leadership and influence in the mass organizations of labor.

This was abundantly shown at the 1933 Reading convention. Meeting in the midst of the strike torn eastern Pennsylvania area, the convention heard the story of eastern labor's spectacular revolt from the lips of its own industrial organizers who had been actively cooperating with the struggling new unions. The committee that brought in the report on the industrial department actually contained a majority who were trade union members.

This Reading convention of 1933 marks the beginning of a mature movement. The concentration on the creation of a working class base implied in the previous convention's setting up of the industrial department was enthusiastically reapproved. With the lessons of Hitler's recruiting of youth, particularly university youth, for fascism in mind, the convention faced the problem of a specialized student department.

Attention was turned to the loosely grouped student clubs associated with the League for Industrial Democracy, which itself had originally been founded by leading socialists in 1905 as the Intercollegiate Socialist Society. In December of 1933 a conference of the Intercollegiate Student Council at Washington, D. C., established the Student League for Industrial Democracy under its own national executive, and affiliated the new organization with the International Socialist Student Federation, a part of the Socialist Youth International.

The YPSL convention further faced the problem of the student by setting its own student secretariat alongside the industrial. This secretariat is to handle relations with the S. L. I. D. and has in addition the problem of the direction of the important YPSL work among high school students. Confronted with the limitation of the small numbers at their command, the YPSL has laid down the "Vanguard Tactic" as the role of the young socialist for some time to come. This tactic briefly is that of a group who consider themselves a revolutionary vanguard and function as a disciplined unit

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within broader youth organizations and youth institutions. YPSL members within any larger body or institution must form committees to decide on common policy and action in the furtherance of socialist objectives.

There was some gingerly handling of the problem of building a mass movement of youth under socialist leadership. The '33 convention voted to adopt a uniform with emblem and the International Socialist Youth salute. These were attempts at the technique of a mass movement which recognized that desire for conformity and regimentation is stronger among youth than among adults. Any socialist youth movement of mass proportions will have to cultivate the uniform, salute and show tactics which the fascists exploit so cleverly, and will run strongly counter to the prejudices of the highly individualistic type of person who make up such a large part of the articulate membership of the Socialist Party.

For the present the YPSL is concentrating on the development of a nucleus of socialist educated youth and the training of definite classifications of functionaries of the socialist movement. An expanded list of functionaries is gradually being required of the YPSL circle, including secretaries, organizers, educational directors, industrial directors, student directors, cultural directors, literature, "Challenge" agents and propaganda directors. YPSL membership and circles are up to the 1917 level.

The educational department has published seven bound mimeographed study outlines of socialist subjects. A National Cultural Committee is at work and has already made available dramatic material. A song book with music, and posters, are on the press. The Red Falcon movement, a movement for workers' children from 8 to 14 years of age (the beginning of YPSL age) was launched by active New York YPSL members under the leadership of Phil Heller in June, 1932, and is now beginning to take root in the country at large. The Falcons are under the direction of a National Committee on which the YPSL and the Socialist Party are jointly represented.

The YPSL is watching with a friendly and hopeful eye,

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the attempt of the Workers' Gymnastic and Sports Alliance to knit together the varied workers' sports groups of European origin into a united American workers' sports group aligned with the Socialist Sports International.

In the summer of 1933, for the first time since affiliation with the Socialist Youth International in 1923, the Young Peoples Socialist League of America was represented at a meeting of the Executive, held in connection with the emergency conference of the L. S. I. in Paris. Dave Lewis of Montreal was the delegate and voiced the practically unanimous sentiment of the American movement in joining with the French and Spanish delegations in expressing sharp dissent with the previous policy of the Socialist Youth International which even more than the Labor and Socialist International, had approved and had been completely dominated by the conservative philosophy and tactics of the German movement. Particularly provoking to other socialist youth sections was the admission on the part of the German group that illegal work had not been prepared or organized in Germany until a month after Hitler's election and until their organization had been completely outlawed and their press destroyed. The setting up of a Latin American secretariat under the wing of the Spanish youth section should lead to the development of more significant socialist youth movements outside of Europe. The YPSL has already aided in setting up a Canadian YPSL movement.

To sum up with an eye to the future: two main tasks confront the youth movement. The first, that of training workers for the socialist movement and its work, is fairly well understood and its importance appreciated by the socialist movement nationally, although state and local support is all too frequently grudging and unsympathetic. The most significant advances along this line have been made since the YPSL developed enough leadership of its own to take the initiative nationally in the formulation and supervision of a program. This has been more easily possible as a consequence of the great measure of autonomy traditional to the YPSL, subject only to the authority of the Party National

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Executive.

The second task, that of winning large and strategic groups of youth to socialist leadership, is neither well understood nor its importance appreciated. Youth in industrial capitalist civilization, and particularly in time of crisis, composes a group with problems as special as those of industrial worker, agricultural worker, etc. In 1933 persons under twenty-five made up one-fourth of the unemployed in Germany and in Denmark and one-third in Sweden. Unemployment in this group is steadily increasing in the United States even when falling in general. To equip the YPSL to win this group will require an entire shift of socialist policy. The party at present invests in the YPSL with a view to getting back its investment with interest in organizational terms. Far from the situation in 1917 when the party urged younger party members to join the YPSL, the party now urges them out of the YPSL into the party even before they are of party age, and in many communities in the last three years the YPSL organization was reversing the normal relation by running party work in addition to YPSL.

This may be necessary for the present emergency of party re-establishment but must not be continued beyond the moment of its absolute necessity. At the earliest possible moment the socialist movement must think in terms of winning the youth as just as important a job as winning organized labor and calling for an outlay of party funds and personnel equal to that importance. For youth in America will either be won for Socialism in Our Time, or for Fascism in Our Time.

BOOKS RECEIVED AND WORTHY OF NOTE.

The Economy of Abundance by Stuart Chase
The Macmillan Co., N. Y., Price \$2.50

The Idea of National Interest by Charles A. Beard
The Macmillan Co., N. Y., Price \$3.75

What Marx Really Meant by G. D. H. Cole
Alfred A. Knopf, N. Y., Price \$2.00

The Crucifixion of Liberty by Alexander Kerensky
John Day, New York, Price \$2.75

Reflections on the End of an Era by Reinhold Niebuhr
Charles Scribner's Sons, N. Y., Price \$2.00