

What Does Gitlow 'Confess'?

By B. HERMAN

BENJAMIN GITLOW has written his confession of why he has broken with the communist movement, the socialist movement, and the working-class movement.* There can be no question, given the degeneration of Stalinist Russia and the Communist International, and the crisis of the entire working-class movement thruout the world today, that a serious reexamination of the communist and socialist movements during the past two decades is vitally necessary and of the greatest importance. An honest examination requires an objective, self-critical approach. It demands, for example, the seeking of the causes of the growing degeneration of the Comintern and its parties not in the personal wickedness of its one or many leaders, but in the very nature and structure of the Third International. Such an examination would require a careful analysis of the stages of development of world communism, of its positive contributions, of its decay—of its transformation from a revolutionary to a counter-revolutionary force.

POSITIVE SIDE IGNORED

This necessary job Gitlow altogether fails to do. He hardly touches the problem, and when he does, he fails to illumine. He does not estimate in objective fashion the positive, revolutionary socialist role of the communist movement in its first period. It is an undeniable fact that the communist movement, in its early years, despite fundamental defects in structure and method, alone held aloft the banner of revolutionary socialism. It is undeniable also that it was the working-class political organization in this country that, to its credit, first raised the question of a labor party and the amalgamation of the trade unions, and that fought unceasingly against imperialism, militarism, class collaboration, "capitalist efficiency socialism," "Fordism," and the like. One may criticize the effectiveness of the movement during this period, or the approach and methods employed, but a proper estimate cannot ignore the activities of the Communist Party of the 1920's in furthering progressive policies in the American labor movement and in arousing working-class consciousness. In estimating the effect of the Russian domination, it is also necessary to show the relatively healthy influence of the Comintern in the earlier years compared with the Stalinist period following 1929—for example, in eradicating infantile leftism and revolutionary romanticism, the dual-union and sectarian outlook that was rife in the communist movement in the first period. All this, Gitlow fails to do or even to grasp. He therefore fails to make any real contribution to a reexamination of the history of the communist movement.

Gitlow's conclusions—repudiation of all existing working-class movements and uncritical exaltation of bourgeois democracy—do not follow from his criticism. His critique, in so far as it is valid, is based on his viewpoint developed after 1929, that is, on the viewpoint of the Independent Labor League of America. He exposes once again the totalitarian regime established in the American Communist Party by Stalin in 1929, the suppression of all democracy and

all freedom of thought within the organization, and its conversion into a Russian police agency. He shows the constant interference of the Russian leaders in the internal affairs of the party during earlier years and exposes the mechanical transplantation from Russia to America not only of political line, but also of internal party struggles. This very sound criticism, however, does not warrant the repudiation of Marxism, of revolutionary socialism. The only logical conclusion from such a criticism would be that a revolutionary working-class political movement in this country should be based on the needs and the problems of the American working class—should bow down to no Fuehrer, and under no circumstances subordinate itself to the arbitrary will of any party or power abroad. It should, of course, maintain international relations with other working-class organizations, but only on the basis of equality and freedom of criticism, not on that of corpse-like discipline and subordination. But Gitlow draws none of these logical conclusions. Rather, he sees in the degeneration of the Stalinist movement the excuse for repudiating every form of revolutionary socialism. This book is therefore as defective in its conclusions as it is in its critical reexamination.

Gitlow is not an isolated phenomenon. Thruout the world, communist leaders even more prominent than Gitlow, whose record of service to labor and persecution in its cause is equal to his, have been led to break with the working-class movement entirely thru disillusionment with the barbarous methods and suicidal policies of the Stalin regime. Jacques Doriot, for example, even went over to fascism. A number have gone over to bourgeois democracy. The burden of blame for this demoralization of proletarian forces must fall upon the brutal Stalinist dictatorship. But no amount of degeneration of the Communist International can excuse the abandonment of the working class movement or of the revolutionary principles which Stalin was the first to attack. There must be some defect in the character and make-up of the individual himself that contributes. Gitlow's book reveals what that defect is, and to that small, negative degree he does render a contribution.

CONFESSING THE ERRORS OF OTHERS

Elementary honesty would require that Gitlow begin his confession by an examination of his own errors. This he has failed to do. The book is a confession of other people's errors, real or alleged, made for them by Gitlow. His own errors Gitlow does not confess; he justifies them and vindicates himself. He attributes gross sins and errors, as he sees them, either political or personal, to all the leaders, with very few exceptions, of all the communist and socialist organizations he has ever been associated with. He ascribes the most ignoble motives to everybody in the communist movement except himself, even in the days when merely being a member meant arrest and persecution, perhaps deportation. He fails to see any elements of sincere devotion to ideals and principles anywhere but in himself. Even when he confesses, here and there, an error of his own, he is always careful to assure the reader that he was, nevertheless, acting from the best and most sincere of motives. With what scorn does he treat the revolutionary romanticism of Ruthenberg in planning to break out of Sing

Sing! But when he describes his own, at least equally fantastic plan to effect the escape of Gene Debs from Woodstock prison, he excuses it by the "exuberance of youth." He never seems to be able to treat others with the same tolerance and understanding. Yet, when, with the help of Lenin, this "exuberance of youth," this revolutionary romanticism, began to turn into a more mature understanding of American reality, Gitlow himself was among the last to sober up—which, of course, he fails to tell us. He passes lightly over the significance of the fact that he was the leader of the so-called "Goose" caucus at the underground C.P. convention of 1922. It was the "Goose" caucus which insisted on maintaining the existence of the underground communist organization which would mechanically control the legal Workers Party. Thus, Gitlow continued to live in a world of revolutionary romanticism (not to speak of fostering an outlived underground movement and undemocratic form of organization) at a time when other leaders of the movement, such as Ruthenberg, Lovestone and Wolfe, had passed beyond that stage. Writing in 1939, he justifies his old position. Wasn't it in agreement with the Twenty-One Points of the Comintern? This in itself is no condemnation of the Gitlow of 1922. But it does condemn a "confession" written almost two decades later in which he is unable to make a frank and critical self-evaluation.

Gitlow apparently believes he has the good fortunes to possess that remarkable mechanism known as a "sincrometer," which always registers infallibly the degree of people's revolutionary sincerity. But, of course, one must understand that he is simply justifying his own course of abandoning the working-class movement. Most of Gitlow's book could just as well have been written as an attack on a movement thoroly sound in its socialist principles and politics.

In fact, the book is written in several different styles and from several widely varying points of view. Some portions of the book, a few pages or a few paragraphs each time, are in a style entirely different from the personal, subjective narrow-minded Gitlowesque manner. These passages are objective and analytical in character and occasionally even display the gift of poetical imagery. They are either examples of inlay work, having been lifted or rewritten from the Workers Age, or they are ghost-written, in all probability by Gitlow's translator, Max Eastman. Take, for example, the five pages of Chapter V ending with the following striking passage: "The bed of Procrustes on which all the Communist parties were laid was the famous Twenty-One Points of the Comintern program." Such literary references and such dignity of expression are alike alien to Gitlow. The true Gitlowesque style begins in the next paragraph: "We American communists took it—hook, line and sinker." Thus the book continues—from the "bed of Procrustes" to "hook, line and sinker." Other pages, such as those describing Stalin's brutal treatment of the American Communist Party, are apparently based on letters and other material written in 1929. Such brief passages are from Gitlow, the communist oppositionist of 1929, and not from the late witness for the prosecution of 1939.

(The second article in this series will appear in the next issue.—Editor.)

* I CONFESS, by Benjamin Gitlow. With an Introduction by Max Eastman. E. P. Dutton and Co., New York, 1939.