
Some Problems of the Youth Movement in the U. S. A.

BY GIL GREEN

THE past three years have witnessed the emergence in the U.S.A. of a great progressive youth movement. Continuous have been its expansion and development ever since the defeat of a handful of reactionary leaders at the First American Youth Congress in August, 1934.

Not only is this to be seen in the growth of the American Youth Congress itself, but in the activity of other similar united front bodies such as the "Christian Youth Building a New World," which united seventy-two denominations of Protestant youth; the United Student Peace Committee, which includes the largest and most influential national student organizations; and the Southern Negro Youth Congress, which represents 250,000 Negro youth.

An example of the strength and influence of the progressive youth movement is to be seen in the annual student peace strike, which in 1937 involved approximately a million students. It is also to be seen in the nationwide pilgrimage to Washington of 3,500 young people in behalf of the American Youth Act (a legislative measure calling for the appropriation of \$500,000,000 to provide jobs for unemployed youth and to give aid to needy students).

Many important concessions have been won for the youth through the existence and united activity of this movement. Outstanding of these was the creation in 1935 of a special government department to treat the needs of youth (the

National Youth Administration), and the allocation of \$50,000,000 in 1935, \$72,000,000 in 1936 and \$75,000,000 in 1937 for youth aid.

Another step in the direction of the unification of the youth movement was taken at the Fourth Annual American Youth Congress which took place July 2-4, in the city of Milwaukee. At this congress the representatives of the "Christian Youth Building a New World" movement for the first time took an active part in and identified themselves with the American Youth Congress.

Thus the two most important progressive youth movements, the American Youth Congress and the "Christian Youth Building a New World," have now joined forces.

Of great significance also was the participation for the first time of certain Catholic organizations, of the Boy Scouts, and of a number of the most important farm organizations. The American Youth Congress is therefore fast becoming the all-embracing progressive center for the collaboration of America's youth organizations.

This was recognized by President Roosevelt who, in his letter of greetings to the Congress, wrote:

"It is indeed gratifying to see in this Congress still another evidence of the growing interest which young people are showing in the affairs of government. . . . The problems and the opportunities which we face as a nation are numerous,

varied and challenging. This is no time for complacency or indifference; it is a time when vigorous and intelligent participation in the solution of our common problems is needed from every citizen of our democracy. The American Youth Congress has become an important instrument in achieving this end, and, as such, has the good will and best wishes of all who are concerned with the future of American democracy."

What we have dealt with thus far is the positive side of the picture. But there is also a negative side. It would be a serious mistake to fail to see this. How is it expressed? It is expressed in the fact that with the growth of the broad youth movement, there has not taken place a corresponding growth of the organized anti-fascist and class-conscious youth forces, and in the first place, of the Young Communist League. Of course, the Y.C.L. has played an active and important part in the building of this youth movement. It has established close fraternal relations with the large progressive organizations of youth. Its influence and prestige have risen rapidly. Its friends are many. But its organizational growth does not correspond to this growing influence and present tasks.

We stress this fact because the achievements of the mass youth movement can only be consolidated if the anti-fascist and class-conscious youth, and above all the working class youth, are organized and united.

Sometimes we fail to see the importance of this. We permit ourselves to be led astray by imposing, but nevertheless misleading, figures, thereby unconsciously underestimating the danger of reaction among the youth.

The young generation does not constitute a homogeneous mass; it is made up of young people from all classes of society. Therefore, it is natural that the economic conditions of these classes and the various ideological currents at work within them find their reflection in one form or another among the youth.

While we wish to emphasize the *common* ties that bind youth as a *generation*, while we wish to point out the common character of their problems which arise

from the present state of capitalism, these can best be accomplished by paying close attention to the *concrete conditions* and *concrete problems* facing various social strata and groups of the youth. "The general program must be linked up with the concrete problems of particular groups." (Comrade Browder at June Party plenum.) It is especially important to emphasize this since reaction has a degree of influence and under certain conditions may succeed in establishing for itself a mass base among the youth.

Despite the fact that the economic revival has drawn millions of additional young workers into industry, a considerable section of the youth, generally estimated as totaling from four to five million, remain jobless. The new feature in this situation is that while formerly, during the crisis, the bulk of the young unemployed was made up of those first entering the labor market, today it is mainly composed of those who left school some years back.

In a recent speech Mr. Aubrey Williams, the director of the National Youth Administration, admitted that: "Millions of those now out of jobs will never find jobs again." Many of these young people, isolated from the industrial process, losing hope and often even desire to work, become demoralized, lost their class ties and gradually become declassed. It is this which explains the relatively larger percentage of crime among young people; the fact that the largest single number of arrests is to be found in the twenty-one-year-old age group.

Here is a stratum which if not given special attention, will be bought by the highest bidder. And it is no accident that the "vigilante" gangs recently used against labor were in part composed of such youth.

A second source of danger is the continued control of the Citizens' Conservation Corps (the C.C.C. camps) by the army. The establishment of these camps by the Roosevelt administration serves the purpose of taking a portion of the unemployed youth off the city streets and giving them constructive labor. But can we ignore the fact that these camps are

completely under the supervision of the army, among the personnel of which there have been repeated indications of strong reactionary influences? Many of the leading army officers are anti-labor and even anti-Roosevelt in their political views. The control that these reactionary officials wield over the camps is to be seen in the banning from the camps of pro-labor publications, such as *The Champion of Youth*.

It is therefore not surprising that the arch-reactionaries, who have not hesitated to attack mercilessly every relief measure proposed by Roosevelt, have nevertheless refrained from as much as criticizing the establishment or continued existence of the C.C.C. camps.

Let us point further to the Catholic problem. While it is undoubtedly true that large masses of Catholic young workers have actively participated in the recent strike struggles and are proud members of the new industrial unions, and while it is also true that a section of the Catholic youth is learning the lessons of Germany and Spain and is coming closer to such movements as the American Youth Congress, it must, however, be recorded that the *major* influence among these youth is, if not reactionary, at any rate conservative. The Catholic Church and its parochial schools wield their harmful influence, and the recent tirades of the Pope against communism are undoubtedly poisoning the minds of these youth.

It should also not be forgotten that a large percentage of the Catholic youth are second generation Americans, that is, the sons and daughters of immigrant parents. These, contrary to common belief, are often more influenced by the nationalism of their "homelands" than is the immigrant generation.

European fascism, and first of all Italy and Germany, conduct systematic widespread propaganda among "their" youth in the United States. One need only recall the intense wave of nationalism and chauvinism which swept over the Italian-American youth during the Ethiopian war.

Let us take the middle class youth. The main currents at work among this

stratum are progressive ones. Yet here also we can note certain new tendencies which show a decided increase in reactionary activity and influence.

A rebirth of certain pre-crisis illusions is discernable in the ranks of the student youth. During the period of economic crisis and depression, old illusions of American opportunity and prosperity were rudely shattered. But with the setting in of economic recovery, we find that especially among the newer students and undergraduates there is to be seen "a return of confidence" and a belief that by the time they graduate all will be well and opportunity will once again knock at their doors.

These young people are influenced by the argument that "labor is demanding more than its share," that "Roosevelt is hindering prosperity," etc. They are also frightened by the reactionary cries of "Roosevelt dictatorship" and directly affected by the constant rise in prices which many of them believe is due to labor's drive for unionization, higher wages and shorter hours. It is precisely among these youth that the latest appeals of the reactionaries find the greatest echo.

The rise and fall in the recent period of such organizations as the "Veterans of Future Wars" (an organization satirizing the demand of the war veterans and unemployed for government aid), the "Franklin Roosevelt for King" Clubs (satirizing the attempts of Roosevelt to curb the Supreme Court), must not be mistaken as merely student pranks. They reflect a dangerous reactionary cynicism toward the daily striving of the broad progressive masses. We should also not forget that during the elections the reactionary Liberty League established a considerable number of branches in the colleges and these were not only composed of bourgeois students.

Reaction not only has a direct but also an indirect influence on the unstable youth. Thus reaction makes use for its own purposes of the pacifist illusions among the youth which in recent months have been turned in the direction of support for America's policy of isolation, a policy which in the present world situ-

ation can give aid only to the fascist aggressors. Even in the progressive student peace movement this policy, especially as expressed toward Spain, has considerable support.

Furthermore, the Trotskyist fascists conduct systematic activity especially among the student youth, and their counter-revolutionary propaganda is peddled wholesale by the reactionary press of the country. While these enemies of the working class and the progressive movement are isolated from the broad masses of the youth, one should not underestimate the harm they can accomplish through the use of the bourgeois press and behind the cloak of "Left" phrases and membership in the Young People's Socialist League.

These developments offer food for thought, not only for our student comrades, but for all anti-fascist youth. Why? Because their repercussions extend further than the school campus. When we make a study of the large mass youth organizations, we find that the leadership of these is to a considerable degree middle class and student in composition.

Among the farm youth the progressive movement is exceptionally weak at a time when the reactionaries are demagogically utilizing the rising cost of industrial products and the Roosevelt crop reduction program to influence these rural young people against labor and the "New Deal."

It is also necessary to add that a considerable percentage of Negro youth is becoming declassed due to specially severe economic and social discrimination and that the white youth of the South are still in large numbers outside of the progressive movement; and last but not least that the adult boards which control the finances of many of the mass organizations of youth come frequently into collision with the membership and functionaries of these organizations.

There is no room for complacency in our youth work. True, democratic tradition is deeply rooted in America's youth

and progressive influence is dominant in its ranks. The working class, although still divided, "is beginning to emerge as a conscious and organized force," and is thus more capable of rallying around itself "natural allies among the toiling farmers, the Negroes and the middle classes of the cities" in a mighty People's Front movement.

But if the great progressive youth movement is to be further extended and consolidated, if reactionary influence and activity are to be defeated in the ranks of the youth, it is necessary rapidly and radically to *organize* and *unite* the anti-fascist youth, to strengthen their class understanding and to help them master Marxist-Leninist theory.

This is the main task placed before the Party youth forces by the recent Party plenum and in particular by Comrades Browder and Foster.

The Eighth National Convention of the American Young Communist League placed main emphasis on this task. It called for the more rapid transformation of the Y.C.L. into a mass anti-fascist youth organization. It called for flexible methods of approach to correspond to the specific features of different sections of the country and different strata of youth. It urged that special attention be given to the youth by organized labor, especially by the C.I.O. It called for the building not only of the Y.C.L. itself, but of all sorts of independent anti-fascist organizations of young people.

In this manner we must aim at increasing the present 55,000 young people to be found in the anti-fascist youth organizations into a force of hundreds of thousands of working class, toiling and student youth.

If this is accomplished, a most stable guarantee will exist for winning the millions of America's youth for the developing People's Front movement, for the struggle against reaction, fascism and war, for democracy and progress, and for drawing them closer to our Party and its Marxist-Leninist principles.