
THE YOUNG GENERATION AND THE IMPERIALIST WAR

BY GIL GREEN

"Too often has it happened when history has taken a sharp turn that even the most advanced of Parties have been unable for a long time to adapt themselves to the new situation; they continued to repeat the slogans that were formerly true, but which now had no meaning, having lost that meaning as 'suddenly' as the turn in history was 'sudden'."—V. I. Lenin, *Selected Works*, Vol. VI, p. 167.

"These are war times. The youth decide the outcome of the struggle, first the working but also the student youth."—V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. VII (Russian Edition).

THAT our Party has been able to adapt itself to the new conditions created by the new sharp turn in world history is attested to by the October 13 Resolution of the Political Committee, "America and the International Situation." This resolution not only deepens our understanding as to the specific features of the present imperialist war, but shows how its outbreak has "basically altered all international relations and is profoundly changing the class and political alignments within each capitalist nation." Every phase of Party work must therefore be re-examined in the light of the new situation, so that we may "rapidly overcome the weight of obsolete tactical attitudes which have become a brake upon the labor movement."

It is the limited purpose of this article to treat some of the new problems which have arisen in the youth movement on the basis of the changed international situation.

I. NEW PROBLEMS OF YOUTH UNITY

Since 1934 the Communist youth have consciously worked to help unite the ranks of the young generation in behalf of its economic and social needs, against the menace of reaction, fascism and imperialist war. They recognized that as a result of the general decline of capitalism and the recent years of economic crisis and depression, the vast majority of the younger generation were growing to manhood and womanhood without prospect for future security and happiness. Capitalism could no longer offer even the limited opportunities of the past, not alone to the working class youth, but to increasingly larger sections of youth from the ranks of the farming population and the city middle classes.

This recognition of the youth problem as a *special* problem, that of an "unwanted generation, a surplus generation," does not mean that we glossed over the basic class divisions existing in society as a whole and in the ranks of the youth.

"We speak in the name of the young generation," we said, "in order to win the youth for common united action in behalf of their most burning needs, in order to make them more conscious of the main division in society—the division between the wealthy and the exploited . . . to make the youth conscious of the fact that at the head of all the toilers stands the working class to which all progressive forces must ally themselves in the interest not alone of the working class but of all toiling humanity." *

Such was our basic analysis of the youth problem and the need for and possibility of achieving youth unity.

How has the outbreak of European hostilities affected this estimate and to what extent must we change or alter our perspectives? This is the first major question we must answer.

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The plight of the young generation which arises from the decline and decay of the capitalist system has not been mitigated by the new world situation and the changing class alignments in the United States. Why? Because the imperialist war has not removed the general crisis of world capitalism. It has, on the contrary, accentuated and deepened this crisis. We do not wish to deny that the economic upturn which is taking place on the basis of the promised war boom may enable a large number of young people to enter industry and the professions. But any idea that such a temporary pick-up will solve the youth problem is highly illusory and dangerous. In the first place, the imperialist war of 1914-18 has already proved that war "prosperity" exists

only for the monopolists and profiteers, not for the masses. Working class living standards *declined* from 1913 to 1918 by eight per cent!

Secondly, a war boom is the kind of shot-in-the-arm which, when it wears off, leaves the patient completely prostrate. The expansion of industry is purely artificial and when war orders cease, collapse is inevitable. In the wake of the war come greater unemployment and misery for the youth and the working people.

The third factor is the most important. America can supply the war market only at the risk of its own involvement. The greater the impetus towards feeding the war machine, the graver and closer the threat of our own direct participation.

The European war is therefore a sword of Damocles hanging over the heads of America's youth. If the United States enters the war, it will be the youth who will pay the price with their own young bodies. This is the new menace to the young generation. This is the new basis for unity. America's young people have nothing to gain and everything to lose from the continuation and prolongation of this war. They must want no part of it. They must fight every step towards involvement, every act of the monopolists and profiteers who hope to benefit from the destruction, death and misery of this new imperialist holocaust.

The issue of the war affects all young people, but it would be foolhardy to believe that this automatically means the unity of all youth. In fact, the obstacles confronting youth unity today are far more formidable

* Gil Green, *United We Stand for Peace and Socialism*, 1935.

than those of yesterday. The struggle for youth unity against involvement in the imperialist war takes on a new aspect, because it cuts across the unity which has existed these past years on a democratic front program and anti-fascist alignment.

Youth's fight these past few years, while meeting the most hostile opposition from the camp of the monopolists and economic royalists, received nevertheless a degree of support from some sections of the bourgeoisie itself. This came from those democratic sections of the bourgeoisie whose interests in the fight against the most reactionary, pro-fascist section of the bourgeoisie temporarily coincided with those of the broad masses of youth. The imperialist war has changed all this. The bourgeoisie *as a class* hopes to prolong the war to gain from it.

When it is borne in mind that America's largest and most important youth membership organizations, while democratic in character, are bourgeois in control, then the problem looms in all its significance. Will the bourgeois-controlled boards permit these organizations to take a stand hostile to their class interests? This depends, in the first place, upon how strong the anti-war sentiments of the youth are within these organizations, and upon how well they are organized. One can, however, be on the safe side in saying that the issue of the war will create all sorts of differences and difficulties within these organizations and their leaderships.

There is another important obstacle which stands in the way of uniting the masses of working class and

middle class youth against involvement in the war. That obstacle is the widespread illusion that this war is a just war, a war for democracy. This point of view is especially strong among middle class student youth and Jewish youth. These young people are ready to admit that Chamberlain and Daladier cannot be trusted and that they represent the predatory, imperialist interests of the British and French ruling classes. They argue, however, that the people of these countries are engaged in a just war, and that these people will determine the outcome of the war. What these youth ignore, and what the social patriots consciously hide from them, is the truth that Lenin patiently repeated during the last war.

"What is required is the *ability* to explain to the masses that the social and political character of the war is determined, not by the 'good intentions' of individuals or groups, or even of people, but by the position of the *class* which conducts the war, by the *class policy* of which the war is a continuation, by the *ties* of capital, which is the dominant economic force in modern society, by the *imperialist character* of international capital. . . ."*

Certainly the working people of England, France and the United States did not fight for a Versailles Peace in 1914-18. They thought they were fighting a just war, a war for democracy. Woodrow Wilson promised them a peace without annexations based on the self-determination of nations. But when the war was over, the imperialist ruling classes determined the predatory character of

* V. I. Lenin, *Selected Works*, Vol. VI, p. 53, International Publishers, New York.

the "settlement" and turned their united strength against the young Soviet state and the revolutionary masses of Central and Eastern Europe. If the people want to determine the outcome of this new imperialist war, they can only do so by opposing the war and combatting the imperialist ruling classes responsible for it.

Most dangerous of all is the illusion that America can give aid to one side in the war (Anglo-French imperialism) and at the same time guarantee America's non-participation as a belligerent. Those who say they want America to keep out, yet advocating a policy of taking sides and giving material support to the allies, unwittingly or not are misleading young people and preparing them for cannon fodder in the European war. That is what makes the problem of youth unity so difficult.

Little difficulty would be encountered today in getting all organizations of young people to come out against America's involvement in the imperialist war. In fact, all the organizations affiliated with the American Youth Congress and the United Student Peace Committee have already agreed to making their leading slogan correspond with this thought. But the hitch comes in the concretization and application of this slogan. Those who see the war as a conflict for imperialist interests on the part of all belligerents, advocate, "Aid to neither side"; while those who favor British imperialism call for aid to that camp, continuation of the boycott on German goods, etc. Of course, the demand for a German boycott means little from the practical point of view, since

German ships cannot reach our shores, but it has significance in that it establishes Britain and France as the favored camp, a policy which can only mislead youth as to the character of the war and prepare them ideologically to accept America's entry into it.

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The Young Communist League will continue to urge collaboration among the organizations of America's youth. It will continue to work in the American Youth Congress as one of its affiliated organizations. It will support every proposition, every issue and demand put forth that corresponds to the interests of the toiling youth. It will not, however, for the sake of temporary agreements and artificial unity, become a partner to the crime of giving support, whether direct or indirect, to American imperialism and the imperialist war. It will maintain for itself at all times complete freedom of action, explaining to the masses of youth the imperialist character of the present war and mobilizing them for a struggle against it.

If this policy means that the Y.C.L. may temporarily be in a position in which it cannot support all the proposals and demands of the Youth Congress and youth movement, this must not deter us. Every affiliate of the Youth Congress has the right to reserve action and even oppose action on those matters with which it is not in complete agreement. This has been true to date and should continue to be true in the future. Our basic policies will not be determined by temporary expediencies and opportunistic motives. We shall continue always to

act in a principled fashion, in the interests of the working class, the youth and the toiling masses.

The greatest danger that could threaten the Y.C.L. today would consist of an opportunist reluctance to come to grip with the new situation. To blur or conceal the basic disagreements that exist in the youth movement on the issue of the war would be to share in the betrayal of America's youth.

Once this danger is recognized and met, the Y.C.L. will have to be careful not to slip into the pitfalls of sectarian isolation from the masses of youth and their organizations. As long as it is granted the right of independent action (and this has been the case right along for all organizations) the Y.C.L. will continue in its support of the Youth Congress and will fight every attempt to split or destroy it. The Y.C.L. desires above all an all-inclusive youth movement, independently led by youth, in which each organization has the right of free expression and also the right to decide on which issues it can collaborate and cooperate.

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As has already been shown by the recent meeting of the National Assembly of the American Youth Congress, there is at this time still ground for common action around many issues, despite fundamental disagreements on the character of the European War. There is complete agreement on the need for defending civil liberties, there is unanimous condemnation of the Dies witch-hunt, there is a recognition of the new eco-

nomic problems confronting youth and of the need for combating the militarization of young people. Consistent action on these matters can only rebound to the good of the young generation.

It is necessary however to warn the youth movement of storm clouds ahead. The reactionary enemies of youth unity will try to utilize the disagreements and differences on the war issue to incite one section of the youth movement against the other and in that manner to disperse and destroy the movement as a whole. American imperialism does not relish a democratic youth movement, in which youth do their own thinking and acting. It wants a docile controlled youth movement, one which can easily be harnessed to the chariot of war. Civil liberty and increased social security stand in the way of greater profits and further involvement in the war. Monopoly capital will, therefore, fight these more ruthlessly than ever, but this time in the name of "patriotism" and "national unity." Intrigues are being hatched both within and without to destroy the Youth Congress and to replace it with a new "youth unity" based on the destruction of the independence of the youth movement. Some people even dream of using the N.Y.A. set-up to initiate and carry through such a maneuver. Eternal vigilance is still the price of liberty—and youth unity.

II. NEW PERSPECTIVES FOR THE Y.C.L.

Although still a small organization of approximately 25,000 members, the Y.C.L. has made its greatest progress in the past five years, growing, not

only in membership, but even more so in influence among the youth. Whatever successes it can record are due to its consistent struggle for the unity of youth for peace and around their immediate economic and social needs and to the fact that it has been learning how to build the Y.C.L. as a non-Party organization, a broader educational youth organization, training its members and the youth in the spirit of socialism, of Marxism-Leninism.

Progress was made by the Y.C.L. to the extent that it carried out the advice of Lenin and Stalin that the tasks of the youth in general and of the Y.C.L. in particular can be summed up in one word: *Learn*. The great significance of this advice stands out today.

If a change is to be made, it is not in this basic concept, but in the *content* of our work and education. An approach was made in this direction at the time of the Ninth National Convention of the Y.C.L. last May. Comrade Browder at that time summed up the main task of the Y.C.L. in one slogan: *Character Building and Education in the Spirit of Socialism*. This high emphasis on education in socialism has today a paramount meaning for the Y.C.L.

Why? Because "the distinction between fascist and non-fascist governments has lost its former significance as a determining factor in international relations," therefore "the slogans of anti-fascism no longer give the main direction to the struggle of the working class and its allies."* If this

is true, and it is, League education must become intensively imbued with an *anti-imperialist*, anti-capitalist content. It should aim at giving young people a firm grasp of the class divisions in modern society and a basic understanding of imperialism and the imperialist nature of the present war. To continue to base our agitation, propaganda and education on anti-fascist slogans in the old sense would be to use slogans that were valid yesterday but have lost their former significance as "'suddenly' as the sharp turn in history was 'sudden.'" It would be tantamount to aiding the reactionary bourgeoisie and the social chauvinists in their pro-war endeavors. Slogans of "anti-fascism" have already become the stock-in-trade of the worst warmongers and jingoists.

How is this to be accomplished if not by an even greater stress upon the need for Marxist-Leninist study? Nor should this be difficult to achieve. A great and absorbing interest in Marxist theory has been manifest these past weeks not only in the ranks of the Y.C.L. but among other youth as well. This is only natural. At times of profound political disturbances, when rapid, sudden changes become normal commonplace occurrences, people seek fundamental answers and are ready to probe beneath the surface of things in order to find them. We are living through such times. Now therefore is also the time to organize the most widespread study of the Marxist-Leninist classics, primarily of the *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*.

Above all else the Y.C.L. has the responsibility of transmitting to youth

* Resolution of the Political Committee, C.P.U.S.A., October 13, 1939. See p. 993 of this issue.

a fundamental understanding of the victory of socialism in the Soviet Union and the advance to the achievement of the communist society. Too little attention has been concentrated upon patiently explaining to the masses of youth the meaning of the capitalist encirclement of the U.S.S.R. and the complex difficulties and problems arising from the co-existence of the two mutually antagonistic social systems. And yet without this background, how can one understand even the simplest development in world politics?

The whole history of the Soviet Union, the Bolshevik Party and the world Communist movement for the attainment of the workers' historic objectives is intimately associated with the struggle against counter-revolutionary Trotskyism-Bukharinism and opportunistic Social-Democracy. The Communist movement was born, developed and became strong in the struggle against opportunism and social chauvinism. Yet, many young people, because they did not live through the rich political experiences of the past quarter of a century, lack a comprehensive and historical understanding of these sinister forces. Today, this understanding becomes absolutely essential, as Social-Democracy once again plays its traitorous social chauvinist role and, together with Trotskyism, feverishly endeavors to turn the imperialist war into a counter-revolutionary war against the Soviet Union.

With war hysteria and warmongering on the increase, the League has the duty of instilling among the youth both a love for their native land—

America—as well as a deep bond of fraternity and solidarity with the working classes and oppressed masses of other lands. To us, love of country has nothing in common with jingoism. We are proletarian internationalists in our ideology. Our job is one of combating race and national chauvinism, of fighting for Negro equality and against anti-Semitism, and of giving practical assistance to the struggling masses of other countries, especially to the Chinese and the Latin American peoples.

Stressing book study is not enough; less so today than heretofore. Only a proper combination between book study and *participation* in the class struggle can train youth in the true socialist spirit. In the words of Lenin:

“Without work, without struggle, a book knowledge of Communism obtained from Communist books and pamphlets is worthless. . . .” *

This means that the Y.C.L. must be an active, militant, class youth organization, fighting energetically for the interests of the toiling youth and the working class.

On all basic questions the League must prove its fighting mettle in the coming period. Of especial import are the issues of militarism, and the economic struggle.

On the first of these. The League must henceforth oppose all measures aimed at the militarization of the youth. It must oppose the militarization of the C.C.C. camps; the extension of R.O.T.C., especially on a compulsory basis; the proposed increase

* V. I. Lenin, *Selected Works*, Vol. IX, p. 469, International Publishers, New York.

in the Army and National Guard, the M-Day Plans, etc. Its guiding slogan must be: *Not a man, not a cent, not a gun for imperialist war preparations!*

Care must be taken in this struggle to keep from slipping into a pacifist position. Our opposition to the militarization of youth stems, not from the fact that young people will learn the use of arms, but from the fact that these are steps being taken today to draw America into the imperialist war. Our fight therefore is directed against every measure aimed at involving America in the war, not against military measures as such. Our support of the Spanish people's struggle and of the participation of the American boys in that struggle, as well as our ardent support of the struggle of the Chinese people should be popularized more fully than even in the past, so as to distinguish our position from that of petty-bourgeois pacifism.

Now as to the economic problems. The perspective of production for the war market and the consequent increase in the employment of young workers bring a whole series of new problems to the fore. (1) It becomes obvious that far greater attention will have to be given to the needs and problems of *working* youth: speed-up, wages, hours, apprenticeship, night work and overtime. (2) A major task of the League becomes that of helping to organize the millions of unskilled and unorganized young workers, especially those in the mass production industries, into the trade unions. (3) Special emphasis must be placed upon the role of young women

in industry. This is especially necessary if the trend towards America's involvement in the war continues. (4) Child labor will once again increase, especially in agriculture and Southern textile. The fight for the Child Labor Amendment should therefore be extended. (5) As industry picks up there will be an increasing reactionary pressure upon the government to cease giving aid to needy students and unemployed youth. A sharp struggle will have to be waged to continue and extend N.Y.A. benefits and to give W.P.A. jobs to unemployed young people.

If attention to these vital economic problems is tied up with a systematic strengthening of the League among the young workers, especially those in the basic industries, the League will be able to anchor itself to the decisive strata of working class youth and be better prepared to meet its tasks. Work among industrial youth takes on a new significance as a result of the changed perspectives.

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Not a single one of the above-stated tasks can be fulfilled if constant vigilance is not exercised against the dangers of Right opportunism and "Left" sectarianism. Right opportunism has its roots in the failure to grasp the deep-going nature of the turn in world history and expresses itself in a reluctance or inability rapidly and decisively to change our perspectives, slogans and methods of work. This tendency is most dangerous at this particular moment. But in the very process of making the turn,

even before it has taken complete effect, the familiar and old malady of sectarianism is bound to show itself in our midst. We must be prepared to meet it. It expresses itself in the mouthing of Left phrases, in the separation of the Y.C.L. from the non-League youth and their organizations, and logically leads to the narrowing of the League to a small vanguard group isolated from the masses.

If the Y.C.L. is to be America's most advanced and progressive youth organization, it must be able to find its *special* role under *every* and *all* con-

ditions. This means that the new forms developed in the past period, such as social, cultural and athletic activities, must be used even more than in the past; but these should be built around the new content of League education. We cannot too often repeat that the special role of the League has nothing in common with a mechanical copying of the Communist Party, but presupposes the building of the League as a *broader educational youth organization*—a training school for communism and the Party of communism.

EDITORS' NOTE

Through a technical oversight there was omitted in the heading of the article, "The Path of Labor's United Action," by Roy Hudson, in the October issue, the explanatory line: "Excerpts from a report to the National Committee of the Communist Party of the U.S.A., held on September 1-3, 1939."