

CPA Discussion Page

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Real Self-Criticism Held Still Lacking

By ISRAEL AMTER

Thus far self-criticism within our organization, and particularly during this pre-convention period, has been deplorably weak. Why should we exercise criticism and self-criticism? It is for the purpose of

learning from our mistakes and weaknesses, and correcting them. Lenin taught us that this must be part of all of our work. Otherwise, there is danger that mistakes will grow into a system and take us off the correct political line.

Criticism of our present line began in January, 1944, in the letter that Comrade Foster addressed to the members of the National Committee. But this letter and the speech that Foster delivered at the National Committee meeting in February, 1944, did not swerve us from the opportunistic course on which we were already embarked. Foster stood alone—and, as he stated at the recent National Committee meeting, was warned not to continue his criticism of the line.

We had to wait until May, 1945, for the appearance of the article by Comrade Duclos, which opened the floodgates. The Duclos article presents the Marxist analysis and represents the opinion of various leading Marxists in Europe. Hence it has great significance for us and our work. The whole National Board and the National Committee, with the exception of Comrade Browder, have accepted the Duclos article and the National Board Resolution with amendments to the Resolution proposed at the National Committee meeting, as against the Browder thesis, by a vote of 53 to 1. This is emphatic and decisive.

How then does it happen that there has been little self-criticism, or whatever has been carried on has been weak? The Resolution itself speaks about "we" and "we Communists" in a few lines of so-called self-criticism, when in truth self-criticism should have been the core and heart of the Resolution. In his two-and-a-half hour speech at the meeting of the National Committee, Browder said not a single word of self-criticism!

It is also clear that not all the National Board members have yet understood what disaster we were steering towards and what self-criticism means. Gil Green, both at the State and National Committee meetings, was very self-critical, assuming full responsibility for his share in plunging our organization along a wrong course. Bob Thompson is moving in the direction of real self-criticism. In this regard Foster needs no self-criticism. Minor's article and his speech at the National Committee meeting are caricatures of self-criticism, particularly considering his highly bureaucratic manner of answering questions in the press, as, for instance, calling the questioner a Trotskyite, thus frightening off all comrades who had honest doubts.

What does it mean to the life of our organization, and thus to the working class, when six members of the National Board, at the National Committee meeting, tell us that the last word in National Board discussions was spoken by Browder and that was final; that Browder would make public speeches announcing a new basic policy without consulting the National Board, etc.? Is this collective leadership about which Browder could speak and write so eloquently?

There has not been an atmosphere of comradely discussion also at National Committee meetings. This has been absent to such an extent that a comrade, at the recent National Committee meeting declared this was the first time in the whole period that he has been a National Committee member that he has dared to speak freely and

without fear of being slapped down. Thus the National Board, and with it the National Committee, by their very method of work and procedure, have discountenanced that which is essential for any working class organization, and particularly a Communist organization, namely, democracy. Two lines in the Resolution are no answer to such an intolerable condition.

Nor is it sufficient to give only objective reasons for errors, as Comrade Williamson did. It is good to point out the conditions in the country, its background and development, etc. It is good to point out their effect on the working class. These are objective reasons—and one can be very objective and impersonal about them.

But what about the subjective reasons? Why, Comrade So and So, did you support the wrong, dangerous, destructive line? What were your errors? What were the reasons? Let me mention some. In the case of some comrades it is due to isolation from the workers; in others no contact even with the CPA membership, not even attendance at club or branch meetings; still others are known only by their writings. As a result of bad methods of work, decisions are made without consultation with those directly involved—just handing them down and expecting them to be carried out. Above all, there has been a lack of democracy in the ranks of our organization. There was and is as yet no stimulation but rather a bureaucratic stifling of initiative, independent thinking and criticism in our ranks.

This is a partial picture of our organization, which should be the most democratic in the world, developing initiative throughout our ranks within the scope of our program and thus continually creating and training new leadership.

Together with all the members of the National Committee, I consider myself equally responsible for the present situation. Once accepting Browder's thesis as laid down in Victory—and After, I became conditioned to swallow the whole bourgeois liberal line that he developed. In spite of my 44 years in the Marxist movement, I threw overboard all experience and Marxist training. I not only accepted Browder's line, but went out to convince others, and thus helped to lead the movement on a wrong path. I must, and do, accept my full share of responsibility. Duclos' article was the shock that made me stop and realize where our organization was headed.

Foster was right when he stated that the main responsibility rests upon Comrade Browder. It is true that individually the other members of the National Board do not bear the same responsibility, but collectively they bear a far higher responsibility, in fact the full responsibility.

This course must be changed, not by a so-called rank and file revolt against all leadership, which is an expression of anarchism, but rather by bringing into the top leadership also workers direct from the shops and leaders of mass organizations. This will help tie theory and practice, offer an immediate check on all decisions and actions, ensure the uprooting of bureaucracy and the institution of collective leadership, which are essential for a Communist organization. Those members of the National Board who have been most seriously remiss must be sent to the districts and states, some back to the shops to reinvigorate their working class understanding and instinct.

No Illusions On Capitalist Contradictions

It seems to me that the entire controversy regarding the abolition of the Communist Party and the establishment of the Communist Political Association is superfluous. It is obvious that, in raising the slogan of "national unity," and pledging our cooperation with the bourgeoisie for the winning of the war, we were taking our place of responsibility in the forward march of history. In my opinion, our error has been in laying too much stress on the prophesy of a "great era of peaceful development" after the war.

We must not make the mistake of overemphasizing the democratic reforms for which we are now struggling. Engels fought for such reforms in the democratic revolutions of 1848 in Germany because he understood that these reforms would make the workers of Germany more powerful. In my opinion the same situation now prevails on a worldwide scale. We must continue our fight for social reforms, but must not be deceived into thinking that these reforms are an end in themselves. We must see the coming "era of peaceful development" (if come it does), as just another milestone in our march toward Socialism.

In our present period of collaboration with the bourgeoisie we must not have any illusions that we have abolished the inner contradictions of capitalism. Ever since I joined the Party (about three years ago), it has been my dearest wish to be an openly avowed Communist. Today, I still cannot do that—and hold a job.

Almost two years ago, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, speaking in Virginia, told us that we could "come out of our storm cellars now." But even within the past six months I have been red-baited (albeit somewhat mildly) by the man for whom I work.

Thus, I believe that our principal error has been one of complacency. A Communist in an "Association" looks just as red to the bourgeoisie as one in a "Party." And we would not have it otherwise. In dissolving our Party, we had no intention of losing our identity as Communists.

Seeing that the change has not accomplished all for which we had hoped, I think it is now time for the reestablishment of the Communist Party with, incidentally, the restoration of the beloved word, "comrade," and the "International" as our song.

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Browder's Errors Have Roots Among Large Sections in U.S.

The National Committee has stated that the first and main responsibility for the opportunist deviations of our party rests with Earl Browder because he is the "Marxist leader" in America. The entire Board and Committee then goes on to assume "full responsibility."

It seems to me that we have failed to appreciate that what presumably made Browder the "Marxist leader" was not his individual capabilities alone, but primarily the source of his strength should have come from the experience and collective thinking of the other members of the National Board and Committee. Not only is Browder responsible for giving leadership to the National Committee but the National Board and Committee should shape the development of its members and officers.

Had the National Board been working correctly they could not have produced a leader with Social Democratic and opportunist ideas. I believe that the members of the National Committee failed, not only

Open Discussion Averts 'Explosive' Policy Shift

Life for a merchant seaman is full of surprises. OWI broadcasts provide fairly good coverage of the war fronts, but never a whisper as to what's going on in the American

labor movement, and particularly in the Communist Political Association. The Duclos article, the June 2 resolution, the current discussion, therefore, have somewhat the effect of a bombshell. We suddenly discover that policy decisions now more than a year old are up for reexamination; and that the apparent unanimity of January, 1944, actually covered considerable divergence of opinion—not only among the membership but inside the National Committee as well.

It is of course true that almost every event on the home front seems abrupt to the seaman who has been out of touch with the home front for several months. Nevertheless I have no doubt that the resolution of the National Board has had the same bombshell effect on many shoreside comrades.

I have not yet been in port long enough to clarify fully in my own mind the issues raised by the resolution. I shall therefore leave the discussion of these issues to other comrades. The question I do wish to raise is one lying just behind the immediate issues—the question of "democratic centralism" in our organization.

From time to time, during my very recent memory, the Communists have arrived at policy decisions in such an explosive manner that many of the members and sections of the labor movement were thrown into confusion. Can we say that this method of policy "by explosion" increases the prestige of the Communists among the workers?

Or does it tend to drive people away from us—to give the impression that we are almost as unstable and vacillatory as the "liberals" themselves? Are such explosive changes of policy the necessary result of democratic centralism? Of are they rather the warning signals that we have failed to practice democratic centralism correctly?

Democratic centralism in my understanding means that policy decisions are reached by all the membership after full discussion pro and con. But decisions, once having been reached, all members, whether they favored the decision or opposed it, are bound to give their fullest support toward putting it into effect.

I believe most members of the Association will agree with me that

this unanimity in action is precisely what gives our Communist organization its effectiveness despite its small numbers. We rightly condemn as a disrupter any comrade who because of disagreement in the discussion stage attempts to block the successful application of the majority decision in the action stage.

We understand therefore that discussion can only be free and complete before the decision of our organization has been reached. In January of 1944 I was as usual at sea. But it is my impression that the normal sequence of democratic centralism at that time was reversed; that Comrade Browder and the National Committee had already committed themselves to a policy before discussion by the membership began. Furthermore, this commitment appeared to be unanimous because the divisions of opinion within the National Committee were not made known to the members.

Naturally no Communist cared to make an all-out attack on a policy which the leadership had unanimously endorsed; for after all, we trust the leadership and it is precisely for that reason that we put them in office. Adverse criticism in January, 1944, could only have been equivalent to repudiation of the leadership. The discussion therefore degenerated into a process of "straightening out," where each branch executive felt it his responsibility to convince the branch membership of the correctness of a policy already adopted.

If we had that time correctly applied democratic centralism, the divisions of opinion within the leadership should have been presented frankly to the members as the basis for their discussion. The stage of unanimity in action should have been reached by the entire organization together only after discussion and decision by the entire organization. I doubt that our decision would have been different in January, 1944. But the problems which have now exploded beneath us would have been brought into the open; we would not now appear in the ridiculous situation of being filled with amazement by the article of a French comrade.

Whether our decisions had been right or wrong, every member of our organization would have shared the responsibility. And above all, large sections of the working class would have witnessed our discussions in reaching decision. They would then have known that Communist policy grew out of sincere Marxist reasoning in behalf of the

working class—not from the mysterious sessions of closed boards. To put it another way, both the members of our organization, and those outside who trust us for leadership, should have the right to share in the divisions of opinion of our National Committee, at the beginning rather than when they reach the point of exploding.

I believe we are on the right track again (a little belatedly) with the frank admission by the National Board of its diverging opinions, and the full discussion in the branches and in the press. As Communists, we do not expect ourselves to be infallibly correct in reaching decisions. But we can expect to be correct most of the time provided we reach our decisions.

Therefore let us air these questions fully in discussion; but once the discussion is ended and we have reached our decision, let us move forward in solid unanimity to make it work.

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