

'I TAKE A FRESH LOOK' (2)

The Party Crisis

By ALEXANDER BITTELMAN

THE 16th COMMUNIST Party Convention laid a firm foundation for getting the party once more on the broad road of American political life and, as an organic part of that life.

As one of the major means of implementing these convention actions, the last National Committee meeting (July 27-28, 1957) adopted the report of organization secretary Sidney Stein outlining a course for Party rebuilding.

This well thought-out report contains the possibilities for arresting the further decline of membership. It also offers the means for bringing back into our midst, in one organizational form or another, many of those who have left the Party in recent times.

These are vital objectives to be attained at present and in the months immediately ahead. For in the measure in which the Convention decisions are implemented and the Party reconstruction campaign outlined in the Stein report successfully carried forward will the further development of the Party crisis be stopped. The conditions will thus be created for moving out of the crisis.

A fresh look at the origin and nature of the Party crisis might prove very helpful for the launching and successful development of the campaign for rebuilding the Party.

It had been evident for many years that the Party was heading for a crisis. What was not evident was its nature, length and severity.

Now that we are in the midst of it, it is painfully clear that the crisis is deep and severe. It may last for a considerable

time. For the task of overcoming the crisis is not only to find correct Marxist-Leninist answers to the new big problems but also to implement these answers by successful practical work. And that will not be easy.

As to the nature of the crisis, the answer must be looked for in a thorough and fearless examination of all the factors that went into its making. These are many and varied.

First we must examine the widespread opinion that Communism in America is a failure. This opinion seems to be held by large numbers of Americans to whom the Party must be able to make a successful appeal in order to gain recognition as a legitimate political party, albeit a new and different kind.

Communism in America is no failure, although certain policies and attitudes of the Communist Party may have proven to be wrong or ineffectual. In the course of its history, our party has played an honorable and effective part in the advance of the American working class to organized strength and to influence in the affairs of the nation. Our party has made significant contributions in the crucial field of struggle for Negro rights. Much the same can be said of our party's contributions to the struggles of the toiling farmers and to various anti-monopoly movements.

None can successfully deny the positive role of our party in the fight against imperialism, war and fascism, or our contributions to the fight for peace and democracy. The present strength and influence of the progressive movements of the American people owe a great deal to our party. And the fu-

ture triumph of these movements is inseparable from the re-emergence and growth of the Communist Party.

But because of the concurrence of a number of objective and subjective factors, the party has entered a deep and severe crisis. Essentially, this is a crisis in the relationship between the Communist Party and the democratic and labor movement in the country, reflected in a drastic decline in party influence and membership and in its severe isolation from the progressive movements and organizations of the people.

WE HAD COMPLETED one cycle of growth and approached the transition to another. As we can see it now, the requirements for this transition were a new relationship between our party and the trade union movement and all other progressive peoples' movements, a definitive party program outlining in a Marxist-Leninist way the specific American road to Socialism, a tactical orientation based on the new relationships between the party and the mass movements, and the clearing of the road for the emergence of a united mass party of Socialism leading the majority of the American working class.

The transition of the party to the new cycle of growth has become delayed and protracted because we have not yet established the requirements for the transition. And in this lies the nature of the party crisis.

Unfortunately, the fiction that Communism in America is a failure enjoys a certain plausibility. It is noted that the Communist Party has never been able to

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win sufficient support for the election of a single Communist to Congress, or to a state legislature, or to any significant executive office. It is noted further that despite all fluctuations in strength during the 38 years of its existence, the party finds itself now in a position of a tiny, almost totally isolated minority. From this the conclusion is drawn that an organization that fared so poorly through nearly four decades of life has demonstrated its failure as an American political party.

As we shall see later, this is a false conclusion. But remembering that, in accord with tradition and experience, the American people measure the success or failure of a political party by its successes or failures in elections, it is not to be wondered at the terribly wrong but plausible conclusion reached by many Americans about the failure of Communism in America. And this is one of the most potent factors making for the present Party crisis.

NEXT COMES the rise of the American trade union movement to a position of effective leadership of the working class in the economic and political fields and, to a certain extent, also in the ideological field. Accompanying this historic development has been a declining effectiveness of Communist and Left influence in the life of the trade unions. As a result, an opinion has been gaining ground that there is no further need or room for a Communist Party, and that the trade union movement as such is the answer to leadership of the working class.

This, too, is a superficial and wrong judgment. What is indicated here is the need of a new relationship between the Communist Party and the trade union movement based upon the recognition that the trade unions have risen to the position of effective leadership of the working class. But the fact remains, nevertheless, that it is precisely among the more thoughtful and progressive-minded trade unionists that this wrong judgment finds acceptance. And this is another potent factor of crisis for our party.

Something similar is taking place among the movements of the Negro people and among the farmers. Progressive mass movements have attained positions of much authority and influence exercising effective leadership in their respective fields. Here, too, a wrong opinion has been gaining ground among the more thoughtful that the Communist Party has little to contribute and hence is not needed. This, too, is a crisis factor.

ON TOP OF THIS came a number of new difficulties for the party arising directly from the "cold war." There can be no question but that the forces hostile to our Party have succeeded in making it appear before the majority of the people that Communists are loyal to the Soviet Union and disloyal to the United States—not in a legal but in a broad political and moral sense, i.e., from the standpoint of American patriotism.

This is a fantastic idea, totally baseless and false, but the course of events seemed to lend it a certain plausibility. The popular concept of the "cold war" was of a conflict and rivalry between two countries—the United States and the Soviet Union.

The people were led to believe that this was a fight between two nations, our own and a foreign nation, and not as it really was and is: between two lines of world policy—imperialism and anti-imperialism, war and peace, national oppression and national equality. Large numbers of Americans were un-

able to see that this is a rivalry between two social systems—capitalism and socialism—and not between states and nations as such.

Of course, the fact that the conflict of world policies and the rivalry of systems takes the form of conflict and rivalry between states and governments made it so much easier for hostile forces to represent the party in a false light. And the inevitable result was another major factor making for the party crisis.

FROM THE "cold war" came still another difficulty. This was the attempt of the monopolies and their political servants to destroy the Communist Party. Of course, Communists were not the only ones to be hounded and persecuted. But of existing political parties, ours was the only party that was practically driven out of the open political arena. It was forced to live in an environment where there is no political life and no other political parties—in a political vacuum, so to speak. And no party can endure that for any length of time without entering a serious crisis, especially when other factors are making for the same thing. And this was precisely what happened to us.

The effects of the extended period of relative prosperity since the end of the war were mainly of an indirect nature. They tended to maintain an economic environment in which the party crisis was maturing more rapidly because of the other factors. Without these other factors, the economic situation by itself could not and did not influence the rise and development of the party crisis. And in passing: the relative prosperity was spotty, uneven, marked by crisis elements and two serious recessions.

THUS FAR WE have dealt with crisis factors of an objective nature. They are: the popular impression that Communism in America is a failure; the opinion that the Communist Party is no longer needed because the trade unions and other people's movements have risen to great influence and effective progressive leadership; the "cold war" charge that Communists cannot be loyal to their own country; the forced withdrawal of the party from the open political arena and life in a political vacuum; economic conditions maintaining a favorable environment for these crisis-making factors.

It is perfectly clear that these objective factors were bound to produce a serious party crisis. Fewer errors or shortcomings in orientation and policy could have reduced the severity of the crisis. Losses in membership and influence might have been kept down somewhat. The isolation itself need not have become so total and extensive. But the crisis itself was objectively inevitable and inescapable.

(Tomorrow: Party Crisis—Subjective Factors.)



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