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# ANENT THE AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

BY WILLIAM Z. FOSTER

THE editors of *The Communist* have received the following letter from a professional branch in the Middle West:

"Dear Comrades:

"The article in the September issue of *The Communist*, entitled 'The Communist Party and the Professionals,' by Comrade William Z. Foster, has been received by our professional branch as very timely, instructive and thought-provoking. Its discussion cleared up many misconceptions, and helped re-orientate many of our comrades in a very clear and perhaps forceful manner, out of a partially sectarian, petty-bourgeois and non-Leninist dislocation.

"The lessons gained from it are invaluable. In the course of the discussion, however, one particular statement came up for considerable comment. Most of our medical comrades took exception to the statement that the American Medical Association 'is reactionary not only politically but also medically.' The criticism was tactlessly made that 'That's the trouble when a layman designs to discuss the problems in a professional sphere of which he knows nothing.'

"This sectarian statement was then criticized on two points, namely: (1) that without question Comrade Foster had the expert advice of medical comrades perhaps better orientated than many of us, and (2) it is wrong and sectarian for medical men to take the attitude that a layman cannot rightly criticize the profession, for, it was aphoristically stated, 'A man can tell a good egg from a bad one without being able to lay one.'

"The function of the A.M.A., it was

argued, is not as an organization to provide the initiative in medical progress, but as a regulatory mechanism to restrain the initiative of harmfully advocated policies. In doing this, not being infallible, it often errs by restraining good procedures and passing poor ones. In this way it does at times act in a reactionary manner. But this does not justify it being stamped 'reactionary medically.'

"But, we showed further, if the A.M.A. has neglected to take the initiative in medical progress and research (except for a very limited number of research grants) it is because of this neglect acting 'reactionary medically.'

"We continued further to analyze what was meant by 'reactionary medically.' It was shown that organized medicine has on numerous occasions in the past acted as a burden on the advance of medical progress, classic examples of which are Pasteur, Lister, Semmelweiss, etc.

"Then, further, since we readily admit organized medicine's leadership's reactionary political role, it should be readily seen that as a result of this role a retarding effect is exerted on the progress of medical science.

"Then also, as a result of its economic tie-up with commercial pharmaceutical interests, it is inevitable that some of the medicaments are prematurely or even wrongly admitted into the armamentarium of medical therapeutics, only to be rejected by clinical trial of a more thorough type, e.g., di-nitrophenol experiences, and particularly the overwhelming commercial exploitation of certain scientifically useful products such as the vitamins, the hormones, and other 'panaceaic' remedies.

"All these effects being interrelated and interdependent thus to a certain extent justify the accusation that the A.M.A. is reactionary medically as well. All these result from two grave misconceptions of organized medicine:

"1. Emphasis of the commercial value of medical practice over its social value.

"2. An often pseudo-scientific evaluation of medical progress as opposed to a consciously applied dialectical approach.

"It was finally concluded that in effect Comrade Foster's statement was correct, but that perhaps it should have been less bluntly and more correctly, or possibly more euphemistically, stated if it read, 'reactionary not only politically, but also *often in effect* medically.'

"We pass on the result of this discussion and the criticism for whatever value it may have. Should the responsible comrades see fit to comment on this, we feel sure that such comment will receive due consideration and appreciation.

"Comradely yours,

"Medical director of professional branch."



### COMRADE FOSTER'S REPLY

In replying to the above letter I should like, before going into the main question of whether or not the A.M.A. is "reactionary medically," to say a word about the contention of "most of our medical comrades" in the branch discussion to the effect that a "layman" like myself is not qualified to make a characterization of the medical policy of the A.M.A.

Such a point of view cannot be accepted by Marxists. It is a remnant of the guildism characteristic of bourgeois professionals: the tendency to conceive of their professions as a sort of mystery quite beyond the understanding of all outsiders. It is in this narrow craft and caste spirit that we find engineers arguing that only trained engineers can know the real

course of industry; artists contending that only artists are really qualified to explain art, etc. Such people try to make intellectual monopolies of their occupations, to build Chinese walls of incomprehensibility around them.

But Marxists do not recognize such unscalable technical barriers. One need not be an expert in the details of a profession in order to understand its general tendency, although, of course, the more detailed knowledge one has the better. If this were not true, then it would have been impossible for Marxian theoreticians, especially Engels and Lenin, to make their profound scientific analysis of the wide field of science, art and letters.

So far as my passing such a general opinion on the A.M.A. is concerned, it did not require much Marxian skill or detailed medical knowledge. That the A.M.A. is reactionary medically is so obvious that any reasonably informed person should be able to perceive it without serious difficulty.

Now let us view some of the outstanding facts that stamp the A.M.A. as "reactionary medically." But first a definition is necessary: when I speak of the A.M.A. in this sense I refer to the Fishbein clique of reactionaries who control it and dictate its policies. Doubtless the bulk of the medical profession is progressively inclined, both politically and medically, and one would have to be blind not to see the tremendous technical progress made by American medicine in recent years.

To begin with, we are agreed that the A.M.A. is reactionary politically. It is dominated by the big pharmaceutical companies and well-to-do physicians, and it is tied up with a whole

series of other reactionary economic and political influences and interests. Hence, especially in social legislation, most of which has a direct bearing upon the people's health, the A.M.A. is usually found either openly or covertly on the side of reaction. This is being dramatically illustrated by its present fight against the Roosevelt administration's progressive health program.

The reactionary political policy of the A.M.A. unavoidably has a retarding effect upon the technique of medical practice itself; for, as you correctly state, scientific technique and politics are directly related to each other. To see this basic fact demonstrated graphically in its extremes, all we have to do is to glance at the Soviet Union and at Nazi Germany. In the former instance, science (including medicine), under a developing socialist system, is flourishing and expanding; while in the latter case, under a decaying, fascized capitalist system, it is stagnating and withering. Because of this interdependence of politics and technique, it should be clear that the wide extension of medical services which the government health program involves, would surely bring about many improvements in medical knowledge and technique. It should also be clear that the A.M.A., in fighting against this program, is acting in a reactionary manner, "not only politically, but also medically"—not only "in effect," but actually!

This is only one instance of the reactionary technical influence of the A.M.A. It has in many other ways directly stifled or checked medical techniques that did not profit the financial interests controlling the A.M.A. One

glaring example of this is the long-continued hindering of the development of physio-therapy in American medical practice.

But the reactionary character medically of the A.M.A. is seen fundamentally in its basic approach to the health question. Influenced by capitalistic considerations, its leadership cultivates the medical profession primarily upon the basis of profit, not of health service to the people. This profit motive leads the A.M.A. into a whole maze of reactionary practices, both political and technical, which are inimical to the people's health.

A real people's health program must have as its starting point the organized development of a strong and healthy people. This requires good economic conditions, supported by a sound education of the people in the ways of proper living, including physical culture, nutrition, mental hygiene, etc. And, needless to add, all these measures of sickness prevention must be backed up by the most scientifically organized and thoroughgoing curative system.

The policy of the A.M.A. has little in common with the development of such a basic health program. On the contrary, its influence is largely turned against it. While, as you say, the A.M.A. is ostensibly only a means "to restrain the initiative of harmfully advocated policies," in reality it has long been a sort of general dictator in matters of health. Its word has become almost decisive in the shaping of health legislation, in the education and practice of physicians, in the establishment of medical technique, in the health education of the masses, etc. This powerful influ-

ence it has long used either to play down or to oppose outright many of the elementary measures necessary for the systematic building of the people's vigor and their education in the ways of health. Except in the case of the prevention of contagious diseases, its conceptions of a health program hardly go beyond the curing of people after they have become sick. The idea of actually building the people's health is quite foreign, and often repugnant, to it. The A.M.A. keeps always in mind primarily the narrow interests of its own profession and of the financial interests behind it. That all this hold-back effect may be summed up correctly under the term "reactionary medically," is obvious.

Fortunately, however, with the current rise of the people's health movement, the arbitrary power of the reactionary A.M.A. moguls is being severely shaken. The people themselves are taking a hand in the matter. They are making a political issue of the health question, and, naturally enough, in order even to begin to move seriously towards a real health program they have come into collision with the A.M.A. heads. At present this people's opposition to the A.M.A. appears to be only political; but eventually it will also take on the character of opposition to the A.M.A.'s conceptions of health work and medical technique.

As Communists we cannot allow ourselves to be tied to such a narrow

and reactionary conception of medicine as that of the A.M.A. We are interested not only in developing health work in the sense of improving and extending "the art of healing," but above all in the prevention of sickness by literally building up the people's health. A people's health program is quite a different thing from the medical guild-like policy of the A.M.A. Hence, we must be the champions, especially our physician-comrades, in fighting for all the political, economic, educational and technical measures necessary to advance a true **people's health** program. And in the measure that we do this we are bound to find ourselves more or less in opposition to A.M.A. policy on various fronts, not only political and social, but also medical.

We do not have to wait until after the revolution in order to begin supporting these broader principles of a people's health program. Their realization here and now, so far as possible, is a major task of the democratic front, and we should try to educate the movement to that effect. When we grasp more clearly the nature of such a broad people's health program and begin to work seriously for its realization, then, as we encounter the A.M.A.'s hostile attitude, we will have no difficulty in understanding that the A.M.A. (under its present leadership and policies) "is reactionary not only politically but also medically."