

Norman Thomas: Defeatist

An Analysis of His Policy of Headlong Retreat

WILLIAM Z. FOSTER

WHEREVER the struggle of the masses becomes severe, whenever the people suffer a temporary reverse or encounter heavy obstacles, Norman Thomas is always on hand to blow a bugle call of retreat. So, naturally, he does not let slip the present difficult world situation. His new book, *Socialism on the Defensive* (Harper & Bros. \$3), which should be more properly entitled *Socialism Defeated*, is a thesis of pessimism, confusion, and hopelessness. The message it has for the workers is, *Surrender!*

Thomas develops at length his theory that Socialism is on the defensive (defeated) in face of the world offensive of fascism. His contention, in substance, is not merely that the workers have experienced a number of serious defeats (as indeed they have in Germany, Italy, Austria, etc.) and that they have need to reform their lines (as is the real situation); but, instead, that they have been decisively defeated, are in general retreat, and have only a defensive strategy. Thomas' argumentation is to the effect that world fascism has beaten world Socialism for an indefinite period. To sustain this false thesis, which he had tinkered together in this book even before the Munich sellout, Thomas summons to his aid many current bourgeois sophistries, as well as a number he has improvised himself. His book is a maze of contradictions and political nonsense.

Fascist Offensive and Workers' Counter-Offensive: Fascism is the product of capitalism in decay; it is called into being by the declining strength of the capitalist system. It is the brutal dictatorship of the most powerful and reactionary sections of finance capital, that is, of the great bankers and industrialists. Fascism develops when finance capital, faced by shrinking home and foreign markets in the deepening general crisis of capitalism, in order to maintain or increase its profits, develops a violent offensive on two fronts. On the one hand, it intensifies its exploitation of the toilers in its own territories by breaking up their trade unions and political parties and by abolishing bourgeois-democratic government; and on the other hand, it seeks to thrust aside or crush its imperialist rivals abroad by wars or threats of war. As the general crisis deepens, the fascist offensive has spread until now it is a world menace.

A contributory factor to the growth of fascism has been weakness in the ranks of the workers. With correct policies on the part of labor, fascism would have been crushed in the egg. Thus, when at the close of the World

War the German workers actually set up Soviets and virtually controlled Germany, Socialism could have been achieved in that country and fascism forever prevented if the Social Democrats had followed the example of the Russian Bolsheviks and gone through with the revolution. But they did not; instead, they restored capitalist control and thus prepared the way for fascism. Their later sellout of the revolution in Italy, their studied post-war policy of putting European capitalism back on its feet, and their refusal to join with the Communist Party in the struggle against Hitler led the European workers from one big defeat to another and cleared the way for fascism.

Notwithstanding these defeats and the consequent growth of fascism due to the bankruptcy of the reformist policy of the Second International, the workers, under the leadership of the Communist International, are now developing a world counter-offensive against the monster, fascism. This struggle proceeds along three major channels: (1) the building of Socialism in the Soviet Union; (2) the organization of People's Front movements in various countries; and (3) the development of a concerted struggle of the democratic peoples of the world to repel the fascist war aggressors and to secure world peace. These great movements are the means to defend the masses' present-day needs; their furtherance is also today's main task in the fight for Socialism.

Thomas, in order to show that Socialism is on the defensive, or, more properly, that the world's workers have been decisively defeated, waves aside all these three phases of the masses' counter-offensive against fascism as either negligible in value or actually harmful to the workers' daily struggle and to Socialism. He tries to reduce the workers' real fight simply to the meek activities of the reformist Second International. Moreover, he makes the masses' cause seem all the more hopeless by enormously exaggerating the power of the capitalist enemy. Let us consider Thomas' argumentation in some detail, starting with the latter point.

Overestimation of the Power of Fascism: Thomas builds up fascism as a virtually invincible force by overestimating its strength in several respects. First, economically: Fascism, by increasing the exploitation of the workers, sharpens the contradictions between the masses' producing and buying powers, and this tends definitely to weaken the economic basis of the capitalist system. But Thomas be-

lieves the opposite to be the case—that fascism has actually strengthened capitalism economically by overcoming its internal economic contradictions. This is what he has in mind when he writes typically that "Collectivism under the totalitarian state may give the workers more or less security, health, and amusement. . . ." Manifestly, fascism could do this only by overcoming the basic flaws in the capitalist system, the industrial crises, unemployment, low wages, etc. Thomas' theory, in substance, amounts to an acceptance of the claims made by fascists that fascism constitutes the cure for the economic weakness of capitalism.

Second, Thomas further lends fascism an appearance of vast strength by giving it a mass base far wider than it actually has. He starts out by adopting the fascist theory that fascism is "a lower middle-class dictatorship." He denies that fascism is dominated by and serves the interests of finance capital, and to prove his contention, he quotes approvingly the reactionary Calvin B. Hoover as follows: "Hitler's victory has been a crushing defeat for capitalism"; and E. Heimann, who says, "with the exception of a few armament factories, it is not the big corporations that benefit the most from German fascism but the middle and small ones." Thomas then adds his comment that "The German industrialists who helped Hitler to power miscalculated. They thought they could use him and his movement." This nonsense he writes despite the deluge of reliable statistics which show conclusively that it is precisely the big capitalists in Germany who are profiting by fascism and that the smaller business and professional elements are being crushed by the unprecedented growth of monopoly.

Having thus glibly given the middle class to fascism, Thomas tries similarly to turn over the working class. Now, when Hitler smashed the German workers' political parties, trade unions, and cooperatives, and liquidated the bourgeois-democratic government, it was not only to forestall the advancing revolution but also to drastically worsen the workers' existing conditions. Under Nazism, real wages have been cut at least 20 percent, the workday has been lengthened, new speedup methods have been introduced, and the whole body of social-insurance legislation has been slashed.

But Thomas ignores all this. On the contrary, he appears to be struck by the things Hitler has done "for" the workers, not "to" them. He makes the amazing statement that: "The people, except the unfortunate Jews and the critics of the regime, are taken care of. Nazism and fascism generally cannot afford to be so careless of the sick, the unemployed, and the underprivileged as was *laissez-faire* or finance capital in its heyday." Hitler and Goering could put their stamp of approval upon that passage. Thomas also elaborates on the good things that fascism has brought to the Austrian workers, "out of funds taken from non-Aryans and others of the bourgeoisie."

Fascism, by crass demagoguery and terrorism,

has won or forced into its service large numbers of the middle class and even considerable of the more backward sections of the working class; but it is false to say that fascism is shielding the interests of these masses at the expense of big capital. Just the reverse is the case.

From his erroneous theories that fascism is curing the economic contradictions of capitalism and that it is protecting the interests of the proletariat and middle class, Thomas draws the equally false conclusion that fascism has anti-capitalist tendencies. He even broadly hints that it may gradually evolve into Socialist democracy. He is sure, however, that bourgeois democracy can never be restored in fascist countries, and as for the Socialist revolution, it is virtually impossible, being only thinkable as the accompaniment of a long, devastating war. But as he has already told us that in the event of a great war there would everywhere be a growth of totalitarian, anti-Socialist states which would crush out all liberty, he has thus pretty well slammed shut all doors against the Socialist revolution. The only practical conclusion to be drawn from his argument is that fascism is impregnable.

Repudiation of the Soviet Union: Having built up fascism as virtually unconquerable, Thomas proceeds further to develop his theory that "Socialism is on the defensive [defeated]" by eliminating, one after another, the three main phases of mass struggles as factors in the fight for democracy and Socialism which I have noted above: the Soviet Union, the People's Front, and the world democratic struggle for peace.

In his attempt to discount the Soviet Union as a progressive factor in the building of world Socialism, Thomas starts out by giving it a certain amount of inescapable credit for some of its achievements—its great industrial advance, its broad educational system, its development of science, etc.—much as any liberal tourist might do. But this is only so much window dressing: Thomas soon displays his real stock in trade—an elaborate collection of belittlements, perfectionist criticism, misrepresentations, half-truths, and downright lies well worthy of the Hearst press.

Thomas says, "Socialism has not been established in the Soviet Union." Furthermore, "Russian development . . . today . . . is not toward, but away from, the Socialist ideal of a fellowship of free men." Like every anti-Soviet writer, Thomas identifies the Soviet state with the fascist totalitarian regimes. He also declares there is a regrowth of classes in the Soviet Union, largely because of Stakhanovism. And "If Russia is democratic," says he, "the word democracy has lost its meaning." Moreover, he says, the Russian masses are still exploited, but now by the Soviet state. The Russian trade unions are like company unions, and "Communist treatment of the Russian peasants and Asiatic nomads, if it should be taken as a precedent for Communist or Socialist action in other lands, would

justify the most extreme agrarian opposition to any party advocating or practicing it." Thomas also slobbers over the fate of the kulaks and the Trotsky-Zinoviev-Bukharin wreckers. The Red Army he sees primarily as an instrument to keep Stalin in power, and the Soviet peace policy is just an instigation to war. And he believes that "the march towards Socialism can be resumed" only if the Communist regime is overthrown.

Thus, like Leon Trotsky, Westbrook Pegler, Isaac Don Levine, Eugene Lyons, General Johnson, and other counter-revolutionary Red-baiters, Norman Thomas shamelessly slanders the first workers' republic. But in the face of his lies stands the great Socialist reality of the Soviet Union. The Russian workers and peasants have wiped out capitalism on one-sixth of the habitable globe and in spite of incredible obstacles have built their new Socialist system. They have shown to the whole world that capitalism can be abolished and that Socialism solves all the great economic and political problems which plague humanity under capitalism—exploitation, ignorance, poverty, industrial crises, unemployment, national hatred and war. The very existence of the Soviet Union constitutes a powerful worldwide ideological offensive for Socialism. It is the backbone of world democracy, the mainstay of every liberty the world masses now have. It is giving fresh hope and courage to the oppressed millions of the earth. All this, Thomas, "Socialist" leader, would try to belie and hide, but every reactionary in the world is acutely aware of its actuality and so, increasingly, are the toiling masses of all countries.

Rejection of the People's Front: Thomas, after repudiating the Soviet Union as a positive factor for world Socialism, proceeds to show up his "Socialism on the defensive [defeated]" theory by similarly canceling out the People's Front. He makes three main points against it: that it is class collaboration, that it is merely an emergency measure, and that it is only a defensive tactic.

First, the People's Front is not class collaboration. Thomas' implication that it is the cooperation (subordination) of the workers with the bourgeoisie that the parties and unions of the Second International have long practiced so disastrously, is entirely false. On the contrary, the People's Front is an alliance of the toiling masses, with the workers at their head, that fights directly against the capitalists. It is a thrust straight at the heart of fascism, the main enemy of democracy and Socialism.

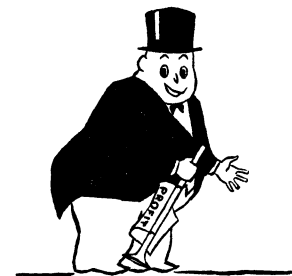
Second, the People's Front is not an emergency measure to defeat the threat of an immediate seizure of power by the fascists, as Thomas says. It is much more. It is the most powerful and practical political combination for the defense of the masses' interests generally in this period of capitalism, whether the fascist danger is acute or not in the given country. When Thomas rejects the democratic front in the United States on the grounds

that there is no fascist emergency he tries to knock from the hands of the workers the best weapon to advance their daily demands and to prevent the rise of reaction.

Third, Thomas is profoundly in error when he says, "The Popular Front is essentially, by its very nature, a defensive tactic. . . . Its very existence, as at least a temporary substitute for the old Socialist attack on capitalism, is an acknowledgment that the aggressive has passed to an actual or potential fascism." From which wrong premise he draws the incorrect conclusion that this "defensive" weapon cannot possibly advance the cause of Socialism. While he grudgingly admits that the People's Front in France checked the advance of fascism in that country, he denies that this in any way furthered the fight for Socialism.

Such a conception shows how completely Thomas misunderstands the role and character of the People's Front. While it is true that the People's Front does defend democracy, and successfully, against the assaults of fascism, it also does far more. It goes over on to the offensive and broadens out the whole base of popular liberty, creating a new, advanced type of democracy. Its struggle against fascism weakens the main enemy of the people, big capital, and thus profoundly improves the objective conditions for the advance to Socialism.

All this is clearly seen in every country where there is a powerful People's Front movement. Take France, for example: The workers there, when they set out with the People's Front, in developing their defensive struggle against fascism, went over into a powerful counter-offensive which organized four million new trade unionists, established



the forty-hour week, set up solid contacts between the workers, the peasantry, and professionals, and greatly strengthened the Communist and Socialist Parties—all of which constituted positive achievements for the advance to Socialism. Or take Spain: The loyalists are indeed defending the liberties of the people from the vicious attack of fascism. But if the loyalists win the war they will have delivered a body blow to the great enemy, finance capital and the big landlords, and will have built an advanced, democratic state which will offer the possibility for a speedy and (so far as internal class forces are concerned) relatively painless march forward to Socialism. Or take Mexico: Who can possibly conclude, except Norman Thomas, that the confiscation of land, railroads, oil, etc., by the Cárdenas Popular Front government constitutes only a defensive tactic? And in the United States there are also elements of the counter-offensive in the growing democratic front movement, notably the trade-union organization of the basic industries. Or, finally, take the case of China: Here again, the masses, led by the anti-fascist national united-front Chinese government (an extension of the People's Front), went into battle in defense of their very lives, liberties, and national independence. But victory for them would not result in merely restoring the *status quo ante*. It would shatter the power of the Japanese and other imperialists in China and bring about the creation of a strong and progressive democratic Chinese state, which would probably stand in close alliance with the Soviet Union. Even as the Tories and fascists understand the international Socialist effect of the Soviet Union, so they also clearly perceive the constructive role of the People's

Front, although it escapes Norman Thomas' attention.

Condemns the Struggle for Peace: Thomas attempts to put another prop under his shaky "Socialism on the defensive [defeated]" theory by condemning the movement of the Soviet Union and other democratic peoples for concerted peace action to assist the invaded nations and generally to restrain the fascist warmakers. This movement, according to Thomas, amounts only to a struggle between rival imperialisms and is a direct detriment to Socialism, because it leads straight to a world war in which democracy and Socialism must perish.

Here Thomas makes at least three basic errors. First, he is fundamentally wrong when he condemns the concerted-peace-action movement as imperialistic. The plain fact is that it is resisted and sabotaged precisely by the imperialists of all the capitalist countries. It is the democratic masses that are supporting this policy and it can only become a reality to the extent that they are able to break the power of the imperialists and can force the hand of their respective governments.

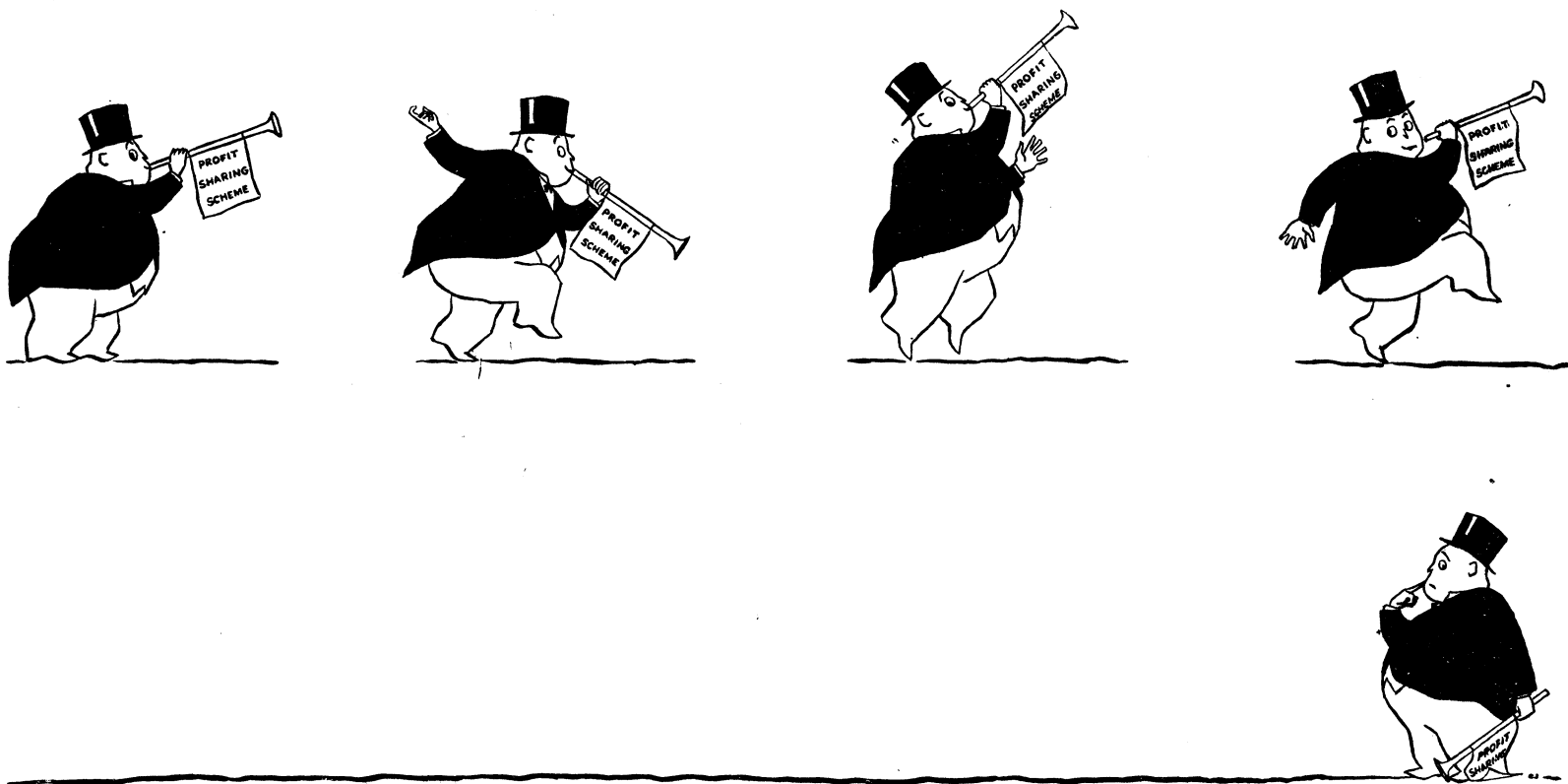
Second, Thomas ignores the fact that the world war has already begun. This is the meaning of the many armed fascist invasions of Manchuria, Spain, Ethiopia, China, Austria, Czechoslovakia, the brutal pogrom against the German Jews, the numerous fascist war plots against various countries, and the feverish armaments race all over the world. This spreading war is here, not because the movement for international concerted peace action has provoked it, but precisely because this movement has not yet been able (thanks to the sabotage of the imperialists

and such people as Thomas) to mobilize the full forces of the democratic peoples and thus to hold the fascists in check.

Third, the movement for international concerted peace action, contrary to Thomas' whole conception, is not only the sole way to restore the peace of the world (which would be full justification of it), but it at the same time constructively furthers the cause of democracy, and hence, in the long run, of Socialism. Once again, the Hitlers, Mussolinis, Chamberlains, and Hoovers are quite aware of this fact, although Thomas is blind to it.

The reactionaries showed this understanding at Munich. The situation there was that after the long series of brutal fascist war aggressions in many countries and of betrayals of the collective security program by reactionary capitalist politicians, the indignant popular masses in the democracies had rallied once more, stronger than ever, for a concerted effort to save Czechoslovakia from Hitler's clutches. The peoples of the USSR, Great Britain, France, and Czechoslovakia were determined to stand together against Hitler, and the attitude of the American people was also decidedly sympathetic to such action. On the eve of Munich, Hitler faced a rapid crystallization of the forces of the democratic countries that were overwhelmingly more powerful than those of the fascist powers. He confronted the necessity of withdrawing his ultimatum to Czechoslovakia; because for him to have fought against such gigantic odds would have been to court certain military defeat, with the prospect of revolution at the end.

The British Tories realized that if Hitler were forced to retreat (and retreat he must



Crockett Johnson

PIED PIPER

without their help) this would constitute a major defeat for fascism and reaction, not only in Germany but in every other country, and that it would give a great stimulus to democratic and Socialist movements all over the world. The Tories feared this democratic victory far more than they did the advance of Hitler. So they went to Hitler's rescue. Chamberlain rushed off to Munich and put through the infamous sellout, which made big concessions not only at the expense of Czechoslovakia and world peace, but also to the injury of British and French national interests.

Thus, contrary to Thomas, the movement for international concerted peace action is democratic, not imperialist; furthermore, it is the only possible way to restore peace, not a movement towards war; it is also a positive force for the development of democracy (and eventually of Socialism) by bearing within itself the potentiality of delivering a smashing defeat to the main enemy of social progress, finance capital, the organizer of fascism; and, lastly, this world peace movement, far from being killed at Munich, as Thomas and others think, will soon rise again, with greater force than ever, as the international protest against the fascist anti-Jewish pogrom now clearly indicates.

The Second International: After wiping out, to his own satisfaction at least, the three great phases of the masses' struggles against fascism—the Soviet Union, the People's Front, and the international peace movement—Thomas thus reduces the whole fight for Socialism to the activities of the Second International, or, more precisely, to those sections of that organization which oppose the USSR, the People's Front, and a determined peace policy.

Once he has performed this drastic surgery, Thomas has no difficulty in arriving at the conclusion that "Socialism is on the defensive [defeated]." For when he casts his eye upon the world scene the Second International is indeed found to be on the defensive and in a bad way. It failed totally in Russia to serve as the party of Socialism; it also failed ignominiously in Germany, Italy, and Austria, although it had golden opportunities in those countries to establish Socialism had it tried to do so. In Asia and Africa the never great influence of the Second International has been almost completely extinguished, and in North and South America its once promising parties, including the Socialist Party of the USA, have largely fallen apart. Its remaining major parties, chiefly in England and the Scandinavian countries, are only hanging on and are without effective policies of their own for meeting the onslaught of fascism. It is only where the Second International parties are tending to accept the policies which Thomas so glibly condemns in his book, as in France and Spain, that they are showing any vitality.

Thomas does not see that the leadership

in the fight that both defends the immediate interests of the masses and advances the cause of Socialism has passed basically from the hands of the Second International into those of the Communist International. Nor does he recognize that the great liberation struggle of the masses is now traveling along the three broad channels of the USSR, the People's Front, and the international struggle for peace.

A Program of Surrender: From his false and pessimistic analysis of the world situation and of the forces making for Socialism, Thomas formulates a program for the United States, the trend of which can be properly summed up by the one word—Surrender! He sows chaos and pessimism in the ranks of the workers by confusing the main fighting issue, by deflecting the masses from the practical struggle in defense of their immediate demands, by betraying them into the hands of the fascist warmakers, by misdirecting them away from the path to Socialism.

Thomas confuses the central fighting mass issue of today when he denies the validity of the slogan of "Democracy versus Fascism" and seeks to substitute for it that of "Socialism versus Capitalism" as the question of immediate struggle. He deliberately rejects the obvious fact that the People's Front, in defending democracy, also extends it and creates a new type of democracy which facilitates the fight for Socialism. The way he puts the question would alienate from all serious struggle the great masses who are not yet ready for a direct fight to establish Socialism. Girdler and Hearst could ask for nothing better.

Thomas further deflects the toiling masses from effective struggle in defense of their urgent daily demands by fighting the New Deal forces as the main enemy and by rejecting the democratic front on the grounds that it is an emergency anti-fascist tactic for which there is now no basis in the United States. He gives the workers no other means of defending their political interests than by voting for his microscopic Socialist Party. What a program of impotency! The practical effect of such advice would be to pull the masses out of effective political struggle and to allow the capitalists a free hand to do as they please.

On the peace question, Thomas is no less barren. His book, full of pacifist illusions, plumps for the ridiculous isolationist theory that the American people can escape the fascist warmakers simply by running away from them, by shutting themselves up within their own borders. German, Italian, and Japanese fascists, after having already violently infringed upon American national interests in various parts of the globe, are now planning and working to make warlike inroads into Latin America, which, if successful, would bring every American city within range of their airplanes. But Thomas ignores this imminent danger. He would simply bury his

head in the isolationist sand. It is a policy of non-resistance, a practical invitation to the fascist war aggressors.

And when Thomas undertakes to point out to the workers the movement that will achieve world Socialism, he gives them only the dismal perspective of the Second International. But Thomas extends the workers even this faint hope without enthusiasm or conviction. After eliminating the Communist International and all its works, he says half-heartedly that out of the ranks of the Second International "may yet arise, partly from the leaven of left-wing groups, a new and more powerful Socialist synthesis than yet we have seen." That's all! This feeble conception shows that Thomas sees no victory outlook whatever for Socialism, either through the Second International or the Communist International. He really believes Socialism has been decisively defeated by fascism, and he shows many evidences of adapting himself to this hopeless outlook.

Such is the defeatist line of the semi-Trotskyite, Norman Thomas. It is this type of demoralizing stuff that has reduced the Socialist Party, under Thomas' leadership, to its present low status. During the present period, when the masses are more active politically than ever before, when the trade unions are advancing rapidly, when the Communist Party is growing steadily, and when the movements of the youth, the women, the Negroes, etc., are all making real headway, the Socialist Party goes on shrinking from year to year, until now it has become a narrow sect, confused in program, torn with factionalism, fighting against everything progressive in the labor movement, and cut down to only a fraction of its once considerable membership and influence.

Thomas' book will be well received by the capitalist journalists. They are shrewd enough to see that his spouting of radical phrases is harmless to capitalism and that Thomas' real political line dovetails with their own. They will welcome his theory that "Socialism is on the defensive," and they will not fail to draw the inescapable conclusion from his book that what he really means to say is that Socialism has been decisively defeated.

But the workers will not accept Thomas' poisonous theories and program. More and more his words fall on deaf ears, so far as they are concerned. Increasingly, the great masses, as well as the conscious minority who really believe in the final victory of Socialism, will fight along the three main channels of struggle against fascism and towards Socialism, namely: first, supporting the Soviet Union and popularizing its Socialist achievements; second, strengthening the democratic front and all the mass organizations that go to make it up; and third, developing the united-front peace struggle of the working class and the democratic peoples of the world to restrain the fascist warmakers and to defend the attacked peoples of Spain, Ethiopia, China, Austria, and Czechoslovakia.