

THE PARTY AND THE VETERANS

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One thing is clear. That is, that American imperialism is now conducting a drive to dominate the world. Another thing is also clear: namely, that the reactionary forces of the country driving for imperialist world domination are making a determined effort to mobilize the veterans as a mainstay in putting across their reactionary policies. It is up to the democratic forces of the country to see that these reactionary forces do not mobilize the many millions of veterans in this reactionary cause. The bulk of the veterans, in my opinion, are democratically minded, but this in itself is not sufficient guarantee of a progressive policy on their part. These great masses of veterans must be organized and taught. Otherwise they can fall under reactionary leadership and be used as instruments by American imperialism. It is therefore of the most profound importance to the future of our country and the whole world that the great mass of the veterans of this and the other wars take their place within the ranks of the great democratic coalition. They and organized labor must provide the very backbone of this democratic coalition. If labor and the veterans, or a major part of the veterans, will work together, then democracy and progress are safe in the United States. But if the monopolists succeed in driving a wedge between the labor movement and the veterans, then indeed everything democratic in this country and all the hopes that have been roused in the world for

future peace will be in grave danger. A major problem, perhaps the most important single political problem in America at this time is precisely to cement this alliance between trade unionists and veterans. One of the most important means to that end was pointed out by Comrade Potash when he emphasized organization of the veterans within the ranks of the trade unions themselves as the basis for a constructive policy in the various veterans' organizations.

Our Party particularly must speak out with regard to the veterans. We must help teach the veterans the role of the trade unions during the war. Yes, and we must also teach the veterans the wartime role of the Communist Party. For if there was one organization in America that went down the line to win this war in season and out of season, in spite of such revisionist errors as we were afflicted with, it was the Communist Party. We gave this war a support that no other organization in the country gave it, and we must see to it that the veterans understand this fact.

Our Party must speak out clearly, and I think it is doing a reasonably good job, in voicing the demands of the veterans. To speak at the decisive moment, to really put into words the demands of the veterans is fundamentally important. Pete Cacchione just told us of the Bonus March, the famous Bonus March in '32. Pete spoke about a meeting of Communists in Washington who projected the

slogans for this March. And this is true. The movement took on greater scope than we were able to foresee, but we were the ones who gave the initiative to this big movement. This goes to illustrate the importance of being able to sound the correct slogans, to have a correct policy.

I think the delegates here have expressed the essential demands of the veterans at this time. I am not going to talk at any length upon that. There seems to be one question, however, that is troubling our veterans. This is the question of where the veterans are going to go to find an organization. In this respect, I think the resolution adopted by our National Committee at its recent meeting is sound. That resolution puts main emphasis upon the existing mass veterans organizations, the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars. For it is a fact that hundreds of thousands of worker-veterans are streaming into these organizations and it would be a crime to automatically surrender these great masses of veterans to the reactionary leadership of the Legion and of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. But we also cannot ignore the fact that there are thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands and maybe millions, in fact, of veterans who don't like the American Legion, who are suspicious of the American Legion because of its reactionary record and who also are not attracted to the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Amongst these masses undoubtedly, in fact we see it already, organizations are beginning to take shape. Especially there will be such organizations amongst Negro veterans. Our Party must be very alert and keep in touch with these tendencies as well as

to give full support to all independent mass organizations of veterans of a progressive character.

But it would not be the part of wisdom for us to come forward with a slogan for a general independent organization of veterans. Such a slogan could serve no purpose at this particular time. It would isolate the progressive forces from the big mass veterans organizations that are already in existence. But if the veterans of World War Number Two decide in considerable masses that they must have a new organization, the Communists will play their full part in all such developments.

There are some people who think that progressives cannot function in the American Legion and other conservative and reactionary veterans organizations. This is a mistake. There must be no stand-off attitude toward these organizations as there was after the last war. The American Legion, from the very outset, had such a reactionary reputation that left-wingers and progressives generally wanted to have nothing to do with the organization. I remember how in 1920, when I was invited to speak to a big American Legion post in Chicago, I was probably one of the first left-wingers ever to speak to the American Legion. There must have been a thousand members there when I spoke and I was given a fine reception. I was invited because of the trade union members of that post. Yet many left-wingers said, "Well, Foster's beginning to go haywire. Now he's gone and spoken to an American Legion post." (Laughter)

Let me give you a few examples of how worker members of the Legion

responded during the stormy period of the big 1919 steel strike. Throughout the steel areas the American Legion, dominated by reactionaries, appeared openly as a strike-breaking organization. I remember going into the City of Wheeling, West Virginia, where some 20,000 or more steel workers were on strike. The strike had been on for 14 weeks and the tension was so great that almost civil war conditions existed there, as in many other steel centers. The strike was absolutely solid, not a wheel turning in any of the mills. The Chamber of Commerce and the bosses of the city were desperate to get that strike broken. And I was billed to make a speech in Wheeling. The American Legion met and publicly announced that if Foster spoke the American Legion was going to throw him in the Ohio River. And I may add that the Ohio River flowed very conveniently by the city. (Laughter)

The workers there who had gone into the American Legion in large numbers took up the battle against the reactionaries, who were all former Army officers. (Laughter) That seems to be a familiar situation. (Laughter) It turned out, however, these officers couldn't mobilize enough members of the American Legion to throw me in the Ohio River. (Laughter) When I got off the train, I was met by a delegation of about 100 workers, mostly members of the American Legion. I remember, I said to the man who led them, "Who are these people? Are they ours or somebody's else's?" (Laughter) He said, "It's all right, they're ours." (Laughter) So we went through with that meeting. The reactionary leaders were not able to destroy

it. It so happened, however, that I was billed to speak the same night in Steubenville, which is some 30 miles from Wheeling. So the Legion officials said, "Something happened. We didn't quite get our forces organized in Wheeling. But we'll fix Foster's feet in Steubenville." Before the meeting, the American Legion leaders sent word to us that "If you open that meeting we're coming in and carry Foster out off the platform." Well, in Steubenville, as in Wheeling, the steel workers and miners at the meeting had also largely become members of the Legion, and they sent a written note to the leaders of the American Legion, saying, "Come right along. But if you do, it will not be Foster who is carried out." (Laughter) Our meeting went through without interruption.

Of course the progressive forces, members of the veterans organizations, have more favorable circumstances to work under now than in the stormy days of 1919, when the Legion was openly reactionary and when the whole country was deep in a tremendous open-shop drive by the employers against the labor movement.

I want to conclude my brief remarks by saying something on the experience with revisionism that the Party has had during the past several months. The reason I am mentioning that at the present time, or the special reason, is because many of the veterans were not present during this very critical period in the life of our Party and I would like to give you just briefly a little idea of what happened and why.

How did our Party come to make the mistake that it did—the mistake of developing an international perspective of frictionless and automatic col-

laboration between the big capitalist powers themselves and with the Soviet Union on an international scale; and in this country, a corresponding perspective of a close class collaboration, a continuation of national unity over into the postwar period, with the employers voluntarily raising the workers' wages drastically. Obviously, from the present situation, we say that that perspective, both on an international scale and on a domestic scale, was wrong. We see the international tensions that are developing, actually threatening war. We also see the sharpening of the class struggle here at home. How then did the Party make this great mistake in estimating the international and domestic situation, particularly with regard to the postwar period? It is a long and complicated story but perhaps I can give you a general idea in a relatively few words.

During the war, as you know, there was a close international collaboration between the Soviet Union, Great Britain, the United States and China. From this collaboration, Browder concluded, especially after the Teheran Agreement, that this collaboration would be extended over into the postwar period, so that all serious friction between the great powers would be easily liquidated. Browder thus ignored completely the nature of the collaboration that the monopolists in our country were giving to the Soviet Union and to other countries involved. He ignored the fact that the American monopolists in this war-time international collaboration were fighting first of all for their own imperialist interests. They were striving primarily to eliminate two of their most serious

competitors in the world, Germany and Japan. They did not have in mind the same objectives that the great masses of the American people had: namely, to destroy fascism, to bring about peace in the world, to establish international democracy. Browder ignored the fact that once the war was over, these imperialist powers would reopen their struggle and carry on these conflicts in a sharpened form, one that might very easily become highly dangerous. Especially, Browder ignored the fact that American imperialism, the strongest imperialism of all, following this war, would undertake a campaign to dominate the world.

On the domestic scene, during the war, there was, as you know, a certain measure of national unity among all classes, such as it was. Browder, in formulating the policy of the Party, ignored the fact that the capitalists in this country were fighting the war primarily for their own class interests, not for the national democratic interests of the American people. If there was some degree of national unity during the war, and there was, it was because the capitalists' interests coincided, to a certain extent, with those of the nation at large, in wanting to secure the defeat of Germany and Japan. Browder ignored the fact that although these great monopolistic interests and forces were compelled to make concessions to the worker during the war, that, as soon as the war was over, they would sharpen up the class struggle again, undertake to take away these concessions from the workers and to increase their exploitation. In fact, Browder forgot or ignored the fact, that Lenin's analysis of imperial-

ism remained valid, that the Marxian concept of the class struggle remained valid, and that these basic Marxist principles had not been wiped out by this war.

When we look back over these mistakes, it seems that they were very crude in character. But there was something subtle about them, after all. The fact remains that it was not only our Party that made this mistake, but every other Party I know of in the Western Hemisphere. From none of these Parties were there any voices raised against the wrong policies that were initiated by Browder. How can we explain this? It's true, Browder had great prestige and when he proposed these policies, there was a tendency for these other Parties, like our own, to accept them uncritically. This is only another way of saying, however, that the other Communist Parties in this Hemisphere, like our own, were badly lacking in Marxist-Leninist training.

You veterans, what part did you play in all this? Of course, you had very little to do with the actual mistakes of the Party. And I have spoken to some veterans coming back who said: "Too bad I wasn't here, or we wouldn't have made this mistake." (Laughter) Now, I don't know how you fellows felt about this whole matter in Europe, in the Western Pacific and in the other points where you were, but I must say that although there were letters flowing back and forth all the time, there were very few, if any, that came to our attention criticizing the Party policy at the time when the Party revisionist policy was in force. So I hope that you don't take too proud an attitude in this matter

and be too unforgiving of the Party leadership for making this mistake.

One thing we have got to recognize in this situation and that is we must make a distinction between the Party and Browder. The Party has recognized that it has made the mistake, as the other Parties in the Western Hemisphere are doing and is now honestly correcting that mistake. Communist Parties have made serious mistakes before. If you will read Stalin's pamphlet on "Mastering Bolshevism," you will also see how he points out to the leading cadres of the Russian Party, the most developed of all Communist Parties, how they made the mistake of actually forgetting the capitalist encirclement of the Soviet Union. And what could be a more dangerous mistake than that? The main thing that distinguishes a Communist Party from other Parties is not that it never make mistakes. Communist Parties do make mistakes, even though they are not as frequent as other Parties' mistakes. But the great thing about the Communist Party is precisely that it recognizes its mistakes, analyzes them self-critically and corrects them. It's such a correction that our Communist Party has been making.

But Browder has not recognized his mistake, is not correcting his mistake. He is developing deeper and deeper his opportunistic line. Actually Browder went so far as to set himself up as the theoretician for the bourgeoisie of the world, particularly of the American big bourgeoisie. It's a plan to save and rebuild world capitalism. That is the substance of his book on Teheran. He has not retreated one inch from that. On the contrary, word has come

to us in the National Office that there are some Browderites, or confused elements in our Party, who are now trying to justify Browder's line by circulating rumors through the Party to the effect that the reason for the present world situation of tension and struggle and for the sharpened class struggle in the United States is because we departed from the line of Browder. (Laughter) They say that because of our wrong line we have united the bourgeoisie, and now look what we confront. Such an argument is pretty idiotic, but it shows to what extremes those elements will go who want to justify the bankrupt Browder line that our Party repudiated.

Comrades, the main thing is that our Party has freed itself, or is rapidly freeing itself, from this revisionism; is learning how to be a fighting Party again. Even before the Teheran Plenum of two years ago, the tendency of Browder was more and more to

tail behind the bourgeoisie. He did not exercise a sufficient criticism of the Roosevelt Administration, nor take a sufficiently independent Party position, with the result that the independent role of our Party was weakened, the fighting calibre of our Party was undermined. What we are doing now is to teach the Party to fight once more, to stand up on its feet and take an active part in these great struggles that are now developing all over the country. You veterans will be particularly valuable in this respect.

What we need now is for the veterans particularly, on the basis of your experience abroad, on the basis of the splendid, the wonderful experience that you have had in participating in the smashing of fascism, to give to the Party your fine militant spirit. I am convinced that this conference here will go down in history of the Party as one of the most important that it has ever held.