

On a New United Party of Socialism*

By Steve Nelson

THE QUESTION OF A united party of Socialism has provoked wide discussion in and out of our Party ranks. The Draft Resolution, where this question is again raised, will no doubt further stimulate interest in it in our ranks and among socialist-minded groups.

In the discussion so far, besides those who support this proposal, the following views have been expressed.

1. There are those who say that it was a mistake to have raised this question. They argue: There are no major socialist currents in the U.S.A. outside of the C.P. The Socialist Party is small and isolated, even more than we are. Its position is to have no contact with the Communist Party. Other Left groups are small and also isolated. Thus, they say, to raise the question now only creates doubts in our Party's future.

2. The editors of the *Monthly Review* and *New Republic* urge the immediate dissolution of the Communist Party. Joseph Starobin's view is nearly the same.

3. There is a trend that urges the dissolution of the Communist Party and the setting up of a loose social-

ist federation made up of all groups, agreeable to merger, though they differ on many key questions.

There may be other trends not noted by me, but in my judgment each is limited or is harmful and ought to be rejected, though, because of this, it should not be automatically excluded from further discussion and consideration.

The first view is harmful because it does not see any need for basic discussion of policies or for more appropriate concepts of organization suited to American conditions. This view refuses to concede that there were any serious mistakes in policy and that there ever could have been anything wrong with our organizational concepts. Those who take this view tend to play down the present discussion in the world Communist movement and treat it as a surface phenomenon. They apparently draw the conclusion that no fundamental problems are to be reconsidered anew. Everything in the past is taken for granted as if everything was answered for all time.

* See also: Eugene Dennis: "For a Mass Party of Socialism," in *Political Affairs*, June, 1956; and Nemmy Sparks, "Towards a United Party of Socialism," in the issue of July, 1956—Ed.

There are some in our Party who are afraid to examine the causes of our errors in the most fundamental way. They tend to treat them superficially and, therefore, will not provide answers to our problems.

Despite the Stalin distortions of Marxism-Leninism, some people fear to probe more deeply under the surface and search for the causes that led to these errors beyond contenting themselves with the phrase, "cult of the individual." It is evident that Stalin distorted Marxism-Leninism and its theory and concept of organization while supposedly defending it. One of the chief instruments in his hands which permitted this distortion to develop to an almost uncontrollable stage was the concept of monolithic unity of the Party. He justified the attack against all who raised questions and their eventual physical extermination by a demand for submission without question. Democratic centralism permitted him to eliminate the democratic process of the election of leaders and examination of policies by arbitrary replacement of those he did not agree with by co-optation of others. Thus, Party Congresses became less frequent, grew further and further apart.

These inner Party methods were transferred to the government apparatus and to every phase of political life in the Soviet Union. Thus, we see that this principle, designed for an underground condition in Tsarist Russia, when held

onto intact, without any change, led to crimes under Socialism and socialist democracy suffered. In my judgment, on further examination, history will show that these theoretical and organizational concepts were distorted in the USSR and the other parties as well. It should have been the duty of those in leadership to guard against this danger, to institute more democracy in the Party and the country with the advent of Socialism, instead of justifying its limitations, as was done by Stalin.

It would be well to re-examine the remarks made in 1918 by Rosa Luxembourg:

The suppression of political life throughout the country must gradually cause the vitality of the Soviets themselves to decline. Without general elections, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, and freedom of speech, life in every public institution slows down, becomes a caricature of itself, and bureaucracy rises as the only deciding factor. No one can escape the workings of this law. Public life gradually dies, and a few dozen Party leaders with inexhaustible energy and limitless idealism direct and rule. . . . In the last resort cliqueism develops a dictatorship of the proletariat; the dictatorship of a handful of politicians, *i.e.*, a dictatorship in the bourgeois sense, in a Jacobin sense, results.

What the other Parties will do in different situations about this matter will depend on their skill and on their needs. It is not up to us to answer how it is to be applied in

other countries, but it is clear, it seems to me, that for us in the United States the monolithic concept of the Party is wrong, was never right and contributed to much of our sectarianism. Unless we change the monolithic concept, we are not going to be prepared to develop a true working-class Party that will operate on American traditions and concepts. If we do not, all the talk about our favoring the democratic process in establishing Socialism, recognition of the existence of other political parties in the U.S.A., is meaningless. As long as we cling, as some suggest, to the old concept, we in fact tell others that we believe in one-party rule and that we fear the full development of democracy within the Party itself.

They are wrong who think they are defending Marxism-Leninism by retaining the outmoded concepts of organization which brought great harm even in socialist countries, not only because they were "misused," as some claim, but because a correct concept for underground conditions, was wrong under new and changed conditions. This should be an elementary truism for us and no amount of clamor that to consider changes means "distortion" or "revisionism" should distract us from searching for a proper concept of a Marxist working-class Party in the United States. Unless we combat this dogmatic view, we play into the hands of those who have lost hope of our being able to change ourselves and, there-

fore, it only strengthens the Right danger.

The second view, advanced by the *Monthly Review* and *New Republic*, and echoed by Starobin, is also unsound. Their arguments are: The Communist Party in the USA is isolated. It is "hopelessly compromised" in the eyes of the people because of the Smith Act convictions. It is so rigid in its theory and tactics that it cannot change.

That we are isolated is true. We are searching for the reasons for our isolation and I am sure we will find the reasons and make the corrections. I am especially strengthened in this conviction that a more basic change can be made in our movement because of the truly historic discussion which has been opened up throughout the world Communist and Socialist movements as a result of the events and problems raised in the aftermath of the 20th Congress. Already, steps have been taken to heal the breach between the Communists and Socialists in some countries. This process must and will continue. We must discuss errors and wrong policies which continue the breach and take steps to overcome them. Now the past can be assessed more objectively and lessons from our own country can be more sharply drawn without any encumbrances from preconceived dogmas of the past. The discussions going on now in the pages of the *Daily* and *Sunday Worker* and elsewhere are a good indication that most

fundamental questions are being raised even though the discussion has just begun. Undoubtedly between now and the Party convention, much more depth will be added to questions which are raised lightly so far.

The various proposals made to change the concept of the Party, would have been unthinkable if not for the present world discussion. Can such an approach to problems be dismissed lightly by serious people? This new approach gives us confidence that this is not "just another discussion." It would be good if our non-Communist friends and believers in Socialism would re-assess their hurried estimate of our discussion, especially in the face of this new situation.

While red-baiting and persecutions had serious effects on our status, our problem does not stem mainly from red-baiting. Serious advocates of Socialism have learned to expect that. The problem is that *our policies were wrong, which made it easier for the McCarthyites to isolate us from the masses.*

At the same time, it may be worthwhile to call to the attention of those who attach so much importance to the matter of being "hopelessly compromised" that *other socialist groups did not grow even though they were not so "hopelessly compromised" as we were.* This applies to the Socialist Party and other "anti-communist Socialists" and radicals.

It is somewhat surprising that such

an argument should be made, especially by people who themselves felt the fury of the smear technique.

The argument that we are "hopelessly compromised" forgets both world history and our own experience, for it is certain that the capitalists who will ultimately have to face the loss of their industries to socialist ownership will find new epithets for their socialist adversaries, every day of the week. Those who are so overwhelmed by the argument that we were so "hopelessly compromised" because of the Smith Act convictions fail to appreciate fully the meaning of McCarthyism. They fail to see how even non-communists and anti-communists became victims of this smear and were called unpatriotic just as we were. Had the American people accepted this view, there would have been no opposition to McCarthyism as it finally developed. Therefore, this argument ought to be discarded by well-meaning people of the *Monthly Review* and others who think like them.

Why, may I ask, should anyone accept the advice to dissolve the Communist Party? For this country with its tremendous working class to be without an organization which is based on the working class and on basic Marxist principles is unthinkable.

All friends of Socialism would do better if they pitched into the discussion, suggested changes in policy, program and structure. This would do more good than to stand on the

side and offer advice to us to dissolve.

Then, how about conducting a bit of their own self-examination and answer to themselves how far they have travelled and what goals they attained, why did they make so little progress? This would deepen the discussion and help all those interested in Socialism.

The group that advocates the dissolution of our Party and the organization of a federation of socialist groups is also harmful and unclear in its outlook. By dissolving, how can a discussion be conducted? Or is there no need of clarity on program, outlook and organization?

What policies should the federated movement follow? What will be its electoral policy? Will the Socialist Party take the initiative to organize the federation and will it, as presently constituted, call for a socialist election policy which will be in the tradition of the Socialist Party in recent years—away from the mainstream of labor and the Negro people's movement, doing just what should not be done? There can be no merger, nor talk of federation without clarity on a basic outlook. This is what the whole Left should pay attention to.

One can point to a number of other wrong policies or practices of the Socialist Party which would stand uncorrected. The so-called federation would be without any substance unless various questions of policy and organization as well

as theoretical questions were hammered out in this interim period. I see a major role for Communist Party members to play, not by sitting it out but by changing ourselves while we are urging others to change, before a new party of Socialism can be set up.

From the present discussion and criticism in the world Communist movement of the errors committed under Stalin's leadership in the USSR, none should conclude that those who supported the Soviet Union from its inception were wrong.

To those of us who supported the USSR in its effort to build the first socialist state in the world, its tremendous sacrifices toward the defeat of world fascism were fully justified. The USSR played the chief role in inspiring other peoples to establish Socialism in their countries. The USSR fired the spirit of struggle of the colonial people for freedom. True, errors were committed in the USSR in this period but in spite of that, the positive things remain. Today the socialist gains in the world are firmly established. There is no danger that world reaction could destroy the socialist states. Now we can all participate in comradely public discussion with the socialist countries in correcting such errors as need to be corrected. Now there is something to discuss, *for there are nearly a score of Socialist countries and the Soviet Union!* Our criticism and suggestions and advice as friends

of the USSR and socialist lands can be welcomed and not looked upon as the destructive criticism of its mortal enemies. Therefore, those socialists who equated the USSR with Nazi Germany ought to examine their position and square it with true socialist internationalism. Until then, the open sore will not heal and there will be no progress on united action or unity.

On domestic questions, some of these follow a go-it-alone electoral policy but that is, in more extreme form, the mistake we made in the last ten years and do not intend returning to. There should be a re-examination of one's own movement and its policies in the past and a working out of a clear-cut program for the future on the part of all who enter this discussion. We hope that others will examine their own mistakes and learn from them. We, on our part, will discuss and correct our mistakes as we made them.

Even though the matter of organizing a mass party of Socialism is some distance away, we need not fear entering the discussion of this question, both in the ranks of our movement and outside. Our raising of the question now helps to break up and unfreeze the situation which has remained solid for more than 30 years, dating back to the founding of the Communist movement in America and the break between the Socialists and the Communists after the first World War. I am confident that this question will bring forward

much good as a result of the world discussion. The results will mean a new milestone towards Socialism on a world scale.

Before there can be talk of unity there must be clarity among the forces of the Left on the following questions, at least: (1) The concept of the American road to Socialism. We for our part have been working on this proposition for a number of years and should not throw it into the discussion and hear others' views on the matter. (2) The American party of Socialism must be based on the class struggle and adhere to fundamental Marxist principles. Here, a deep study should be made of present day American realities, the economic situation, political questions, deep study of our history, concept of the Party and structure, tactics in relation to the elections and legislative struggle, program on the Negro question, attitude toward the trade union movement, etc.

On as many practical questions as it is possible to reach agreement the entire Left should get into the struggle, united even if on parallel lines, directing its attack against the monopolies, and keeping divisive questions out as much as possible. On basic questions, we should get into the deepest discussion and polemics, but without the old fashioned name-calling.

Those who put forward the proposal that we dissolve our Party seem not to have a clear idea of what

wanted on this question. They come forward with vague ideas of some type of "from the top operation." Others in this group come forward with a proposal to build a Fabian movement in the U.S.

I think the Left ought to welcome the formation of a Fabian or similar movement in the U.S. It would be a forward step if an American version of a Fabian movement developed in the universities and colleges of this country, reaching into intellectual and professional circles and into the labor movement. Discussions on various aspects of Socialism amongst these groups would be most stimulating and would have a tremendous effect on advancing socialist ideas.

Prior to this discussion, I would have probably felt that this is in direct competition with the Communist Party, and therefore might have opposed it. Yet, today I would be happy with its development. But is this the Socialist movement we are discussing that we need in the U.S.? No, it is not. We must strive to build a mass socialist movement which is based on the labor movement. Such a movement cannot be created by our abandoning the field and burying 35 years of experience and depending on some automatic spring which will give it impetus. This movement must be stimulated by those who believe in it, while correcting its own errors. It is unfortunate that the official views of the Socialist Party of America are

violently opposed at this stage to any discussion of merger. While our own actions in the past may be the cause for the present position of some SP members, it is clear that they are influenced by short-sighted considerations towards us. It is hoped that this discussion will not bypass them and that there will be Socialists who will enter this discussion constructively.

We, on our part, should not draw any satisfaction out of the fact that the SP is small or non-existent in many places. We should remember the deep traditions of Socialism in America which go beyond party ranks and labels; if there is to be an eventual merger of the Left, it is an important group to consider.

This discussion is taking place at a very stimulating moment. Trade unions have been established in our mass production industries. The craft divisions of the past are being healed so that there is one solid powerful trade-union movement which can in the next few years make tremendous strides in further organization of the unorganized and reach greater maturity on political action and legislative struggle and in the fight for civil and Negro rights. Whatever may be the differences in the trade-union movement, already there is a greater unity on political action than there was in the days of William Green. With all the limitations of the trade unions today, they have for the first time taken a deep interest in the struggle

of the Negro people for their full citizenship and are paying close attention to the predicament of the American farmer and even small business.

This powerful trade-union movement is going to face the problems of automation and nationalization of industries and willy-nilly will have to think of public ownership, varied reforms and Socialism as well. If the present Left makes itself a part of this mass trade-union movement and the Negro movement and the farmers and does not attempt to run ahead of events as we have done time and again in the past, then we will be in the middle of the new current which will add the basic substance to the movement of American Socialism.

No group should throw its weight around in this discussion. All arguments should be heard before conclusions are drawn by anyone, including those who say "liquidate," whether they are in or out of our ranks. Our movement must keep together and help shape policies to fit the new perspectives.

To those who say that we have not shown the ability to correct our mistakes since we made so many of them and so often and who therefore counsel dissolution, I offer the following argument and example against it. The Chinese Communists made a series of Leftist errors and followed a super-Leftist policy from 1927 to 1933. They had at that time put forward the slogan "For Soviet

China." The policy in respect to the peasantry was couched in terms of Stalin's formula, "Unity with the poor peasants with the main blow against the middle peasants and the liberal bourgeoisie." Some of the same leaders of the CP of China who followed this policy, re-examined this line after a series of military defeats, forced the abandonment in 1932 of the last of the Soviet districts in Fukien province. Most of the same leaders who followed this erroneous policy examined its error in a self-critical way, reversed their previous policy of "Soviets for China" and raised the banner of an anti-imperialist struggle and unity of all who wanted to save China for the Chinese people.

Life shows that the very same leaders who were previously wrong were able to correct themselves. While I do not wish to ascribe to ourselves and certainly not to myself the virtues of the Chinese Communists, I do think that those who counsel dissolution should help move in this direction rather than to abandon the field in despair and wait for historical accident to fill the vacuum.

There are no miracles that will lead us out of the present situation. No liberal-socialist brain trust is the answer. Nor is the notion to dissolve our Party the answer. Nor is premature merger the answer. Deep and self-critical examination of our past policies to see that they are designed for American conditions, cleansing the doctrinaire approach

to America, should be our approach to this discussion.

We should reject in unmistakable terms the advice, no matter from what quarter it comes, to dissolve our movement. Those who counsel dissolution of the Party should instead throw themselves into the discussion and join hands in the common struggle against the monopolies on issues on which we are in basic agreement. The open sores of the past will heal much more rapidly in such an atmosphere of cooperation and discussion.

The result of such participation on the part of all those who are moving in the same basic direction will answer many questions that are unclear now as to how and when

the conditions will be ripe for the formation of the new party. For the moment one thing is clear: just because all the conditions are not ripe for the formation of such a Party, dissolving our organization is no solution. In spite of many weaknesses, our Party's record can compare well with any group in America as to its contribution to the struggle of the American people, workers, Negroes and common people generally. We must participate in the struggles which are before us, as history has not adjourned them to the debating societies and lecture room for intellectual discussions. In this struggle the basis for any new organization can best be laid.