

The Reestablishment of Our Marxist Vanguard Role

By John Williamson

Report to the National Committee, CPA, June 18-20

In the main reports and discussion we established the approach—both politically and organizationally—to all the problems to be raised here. My effort will be to draw certain lessons from our recent experiences to indicate the direction of solving some of the problems connected with the functioning of the CPA as a Marxist political party of the working class. We do not come with finalized or "last word" proposals. It is up to this National Committee to discuss these problems seriously. In fact, it would seem best to finally settle the problems at the proposed National Convention after they have been fully discussed by our membership, giving all of us greater opportunity to dig into these questions and arrive at sound conclusions.

In my speech in the general discussion, I tried to show the relationship between our incorrect theory and the organizational conclusions we reached. No one can deny that we faced serious liquidationist tendencies in our organization. Some of us were conscious of them. We tried to combat and overcome them. But we were unsuccessful because we failed to recognize the roots of liquidationism in our revisionist errors. Despite everything we said and wrote about the question of liquidationism these tendencies flourished and reached full bloom during the life of the CPA.

Let us review briefly some expressions of this liquidationism:

Firstly, on the role of the CPA in relation to the democratic coalition: While we conducted a struggle to achieve clarity and

understanding as to the indispensability of the CPA, its role and effectiveness as an organized force in stimulating and leading mass movements and strongly argued against those who wished to limit the organization only to educational activity, the fact remains that in both theory and practice we tended to minimize the independent Marxist vanguard role of our organization. Predicating our thinking on the premise of an identity of interests between ourselves and all class forces represented in the war coalition for a long time to come, we circumscribed the function of our organization to the limits of this coalition. We negated a basic Marxist concept, fundamental to the existence of a working class Marxist party, that we must at all times maintain an independent position aimed at influencing in the first place the most decisive force within the nation, the working class, while vigilantly criticizing and overcoming hesitations and vacillations within the camp of our allies. Too often our position was determined by the concept that "we must not and cannot do anything to endanger the coalition." This was falsely interpreted to mean that criticism of errors and mistakes of the Roosevelt administration and the sections of the bourgeoisie which supported the defeat of Hitler Germany, would "weaken the coalition." We tended to submerge our identity in the general democratic movement, instead of firmly maintaining the independent position of the Communists and labor as a pre-condition for strengthening, not weakening, national unity.

Thus we could not resolve the contradiction that constantly found expression in our organization—the contradiction between our collaboration with the democratic forces and the maintenance of our own political and organizational identity.

During the election campaign we called off a series of mass meetings and radio talks, stopped issuing leaflets in our own name, reached a new low in literature distribution and in our press circulation, etc. In some districts and in numerous clubs, not a single piece of literature had been prepared and issued, reacting to specific events and indicating the CPA thinking and proposed line of action to the masses, for the past 6 to 9 months. We could not effectively meet and eliminate a growing underestimation of our own independent role, the absence of adequate club initiative in organizing and developing independent activities while collaborating with the democratic forces in the community. We were unable to effectively combat the trend to transform our clubs into "discussion centers"—instead of centers for organizing mass struggle around the key issues of the day. And we could not give a satisfactory answer to the question raised persistently within our ranks and among many workers: "How does the CPA differ from other win-the-war progressive organizations?"

What we didn't see, namely the intimate connection of these types of problems and their political roots, the workers instinctively understood better than we. They demonstrated this by staying out of our organization in large num-

bers, by not giving us sustained support in local union elections, and on many other occasions.

In stressing the above, I do not want to identify myself with those who attempt to excuse all our organizational weaknesses by pointing to the revisionist errors we committed. The contradictions engendered by our position created certain additional obstacles to the solution of many of our organizational problems, but cannot be used now as the all-inclusive answer for them, since many problems were raised time and time again in the recent months.

Secondly, we have seen a deterioration of the industrial and trade union composition of our membership since the CPA was organized. We know by definition that a Communist organization, to fulfill its vanguard role "must absorb all the best elements of the working class, their experience, their revolutionary spirit and their unbounded devotion to the cause of the working class." Can we honestly say, despite all our positive achievements (and we don't want to detract one iota from them) that our organization embraces all the advanced workers available and ready to join? I am not talking idealistically. The fact remains that today we only have 316 coal miners although 10 years ago we had several times that many; or that we only have 1427 steel workers and 840 marine workers. I could go on and on, with examples from other industries, states and towns.

Equally decisive as these figures, is the fact that our ability to convince the trade union move-

ment, including the CIO, of the correctness of our policies is far from fully established. We do not have so deep-rooted an influence or organized strength that we can influence and continue to lead decisive sections of the labor movement, irrespective of what any leader inside or outside the trade union movement may do at a critical moment.

We know that workers, particularly workers in basic industries, should more readily understand our policies—our Marxist thinking. Yet, we see a weakening of our working class base in a number of key industries. During the past year we had a decline in industrial and trade union composition for the first time in six years. It is clear, that we should have attracted certain working class forces from key industries and industrial areas, but did not in this period.

Obviously, the CPA did not have the recruiting capacity of the CP. While we enrolled 63,000 CP members into the CPA—or 82 per cent of our membership (not counting those in the armed forces) and showed a growth of 25 per cent, that was due primarily to the big recruiting campaign prior to the change of name. We had an average monthly recruiting during the first half of 1943 of 3615 members; during 1944 of 4275; but during the first half of 1945 it dropped to 1185. It is only fair to add that we ourselves, in line with our general policy, decided against any large-scale recruiting this year.

Another example of this, was our attitude to the press. This is one mistake from which I must exclude myself and a few other

members. For months we conducted a struggle to establish the editorial concept of The Daily Worker. To some the tabloid form was to be the cure-all answer. Then we were told we need a broad popular newspaper—a sort of Communist PM. We had similar expressions in the field of press circulation. First, was the liquidation of the Browder Brigades in New York. Then a folding up of the home delivery system. Then a theory that responsibility for the distribution of The Daily Worker and The Worker should not be placed on the membership and clubs. Let the newsstands and mail subs answer the problem. This sprang from the illusions we ourselves were creating. It resulted in negating the active role of Communist members and clubs with reference to the press. It further resulted in practically wiping out our bundle sales. It made us exclusively dependent upon bourgeois forms of distribution, such as distribution agencies and the U. S. mail, to reach the masses with our message and leadership.

Fourthly, the concept of membership in a Communist organization. We developed concepts of Communist membership which said that attending club meetings was not important; that collecting dues was a routine and thankless job, consequently let us have yearly dues; that monthly Club meetings were sufficient. Thus, during the past period the CPA has not had organized contact with at least 50 per cent of its membership. Add to this, theories that we were harassing the members, that we were overburdening them and could not expect a new membership to come to meetings and fulfill so many activities. All these concepts were essentially incorrect. I do not want to infer here that there are no new methods of work that can and should be adopted, or that there are no new things we must all learn. Of course there are, but new methods of work must not weaken the Communist concept of membership in our organization, nor destroy that which distinguishes us from others. The central question is correct policy but, we need an organization with Communist characteristics to carry out such policy. This demands that we combat all attempts to transform our Clubs into Democratic or Republican Party type of clubs, or merely into neighborhood ping pong and forum centers. We must quickly overcome all organizational looseness and reject all theories developed to justify it.

Fifthly, is the serious decline in dues payments. Years ago dues payments averaged 85 per cent for the entire country with some districts reaching a higher level. However, during the last six months of 1944 dues in the CPA averaged 71 per cent and for the first five months of 1945 they have further declined to 58 per cent. Even more alarming is the status for the first quarter of this year in such key industrial districts as Ohio—44 per cent; Michigan—32 per cent; Illinois—45 per cent, and Pittsburgh—58 per cent.

Sixthly, is the serious decline in the sale of theoretical literature by Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin. I only have figures for the country excluding New York. These show that for the six years between 1938 to 1943 we sold a yearly average of 34,000 copies of Marxist-Leninist classics. However, for 1944 this had declined to 19,000 copies and this included 5000 volumes of the Lenin Home Library. I do not have the figures for the New York district, but I am told that the decline is proportionately the same.

Given such conditions, a critical situation was inevitable.

I now want to deal specifically with four questions:

- 1.—Problems connected with the immediate present day functioning of the CPA as a Marxist political party of the working class.
- 2.—Questions of inner party democracy and methods of leadership.
- 3.—Immediate responsibilities concerning press and literature circulation.
- 4.—Perspectives for increased activity of membership and large scale recruiting.

The first task connected with

the present-day functioning of the CPA as a Marxist political party, is that of organizing the most thorough study of Marxism-Leninism by the membership and all our cadres. Clearly the present discussion is only the beginning. Let us remember that a large section of our membership have had as their exclusive guide the books of Comrade Browder, and related material by our national leadership. Our approach therefore shall be to use the classics to deepen the understanding of Marxism-Leninist fundamentals, with reference to the science of society, the laws of capitalist development, the laws of proletarian revolution, the laws of development of socialist construction, the foundation and unfolding of strategy and tactics and the role of the Marxist vanguard party. This, however, should be combined with the accumulated experience of the American and international Communist movement, including specifically our present resolution, studying the present day situation and problems in the light of our Marxist-Leninist principles.

In carrying through this intensive study of Marxism the following shall be kept in mind:

1.—Because of the recent underestimation of the vanguard role of the Marxist party, this shall be integrated and emphasized in all discussions and studies.

2.—The aim of all study shall be to train Communists for effective participation in, and leadership of, the struggles of labor and the people.

3.—We must burn into the consciousness of every Communist that the higher the political level and the Marxist-Leninist knowledge of our members and cadres, irrespective of whether they be party functionaries, active in trade unions or other fields of mass work, the more effective the results of their work and leadership.

We recommend for consideration the following activities between now and the National Convention:

1.—While continuing and deepening the present discussion, it shall be given more specific guidance in the light of the decisions of the National Committee meeting.

2.—That during the summer, and in preparation for the re-opening of schools in the fall, there shall be instituted an examination of the curricula, outlines, textbooks, methods of teaching and personnel of all schools. This shall be combined with an intensive course of re-educating the educators.

3.—That there be an extension of all existing forms of education.

4.—That we make available a compilation of appropriate readings from the writings of Dimitrov, material on revisionism and American monopoly capitalism and relate each to present day American conditions and experiences.

After the National Convention plans shall be realized to:

1.—Fulfill the national program of schools originally scheduled for this summer, covering CPA functionaries, trade union actives, national group leaders and Communist youth.

2.—That there be established a fully equipped educational department in the national office and in the larger districts.

3.—That we overhaul and strengthen the editorial staffs of all our papers.

4.—That we shall organize the most thorough and sustained political struggle against all manifestations of Trotskyism and social democratism in the labor movement.

The second problem connected with the immediate functioning of the CPA as a Marxist political party of the working class is strengthening the independent activities of the CPA. While learning to cement our ties with the broad labor and progressive democratic movements, being among the most active participants in these mass movements, and striving at all times to strengthen national unity for the program of action contained in our resolution, we shall simultaneously develop boldly and energetically our own independent Communist role and activities.

In the field of public relations we should speak out in the name

of the CPA on all current issues and not just depend upon The Daily Worker editorials. We should appear at all hearings—municipal, state or congressional—and present our position. In the electoral field, wherever conditions permit. Communists should be included as candidates on common anti-Fascist and democratic slates, with the CPA conducting its own campaign in support of the ticket. The question of running Communist candidates for a specific office in the coming elections shall be given careful consideration. This in no way should be considered as narrowing down the broadest democratic people's coalition around the main candidates.

As regards mass campaigns, the CPA should develop statewide and nationwide campaigns on specific issues in its own name, and the clubs should do likewise in the communities. This may be in the form of support to vital campaigns initiated by other organizations, or by a coalition of organizations advancing an anti-Fascist program. However, it is also correct for us to take those issues that others are not ready to support, or merely pay lip service to, and develop the broadest mass campaigns, on the initiative of the Communists. We shall also develop the practice of organizing many more large mass meetings and other demonstrative actions, as well as issuing more leaflets giving our analyses of events and slogans of action for the masses. In this connection we must really develop a corps of effective speakers, and all national leaders shall be considered as national speakers.

The third problem under this heading, is a series of measures to bring about a sharp correction in the decline of our industrial and trade union composition. Here is a brief picture:

| | 1943 | 1944 | 1945 |
|------------------------|------|------|------|
| Industry | 42% | 46% | 43% |
| Basic industry 23 | | 27 | 25 |
| Trade union | 52 | 52 | 47 |
| Housewife | 18 | 19 | 23 |
| Professional | 29 | 25 | 22 |
| Business | 1 | 5 | 5 |

This 1945 decline in composition is the first downward trend in six years. No doubt this is connected with our basic errors; with our failure to assume the initiative in helping the workers to find new forms of struggle in defense of their burning grievances; with our neglect of sufficient political education among our trade union members and the establishment of effective organizational forms for trade unionists; with the reflection in our own ranks of the backward ideologies of many of the new elements who have entered the working class during the war.

To meet and answer this situation, I recommend:

1.—That we revive the policy of concentration on specific districts and industries.

2.—That we shift our forces, including key leading forces, into these concentration districts and industries.

3.—That we institute a policy of shop concentration in our day-to-day mass work and find appropriate forms of organization. During the time this question is being further studied we shall organize meetings of Communists, according to industry and trade unions, for general political discussions.

4.—That we reinstitute Workers Correspondence as a regular feature in all papers that we influence.

5.—That we recommend that the New York district, where the decline in the industrial and trade union composition is even sharper than nationally, shall carry through a review of this entire problem and adopt measures to correct it.

The fourth problem under this heading is the improvement in the functioning of the Clubs. The activity and education of the Clubs must have a Marxist content. We shall aim at involving all members in the life, discussions and activities of the Clubs, guaranteeing that adequate guidance and assistance is given to their mass work.

We must overcome the present loose concept of Communist membership and undertake a real campaign to reestablish the understanding of the conditions of membership in the CPA, including: activity under direction of

the Club; attendance at meetings and participation in the working out of policies; payment of dues; reading and distributing our press and literature; and within the democratic practices of the organization, fulfillment of discipline. While steering away from any old time sectarian approach, our members should understand that more is expected from a Communist than anyone else. The size of the Club shall be determined primarily on the ability to effectively fulfill the role of a Marxist vanguard political organization. The Clubs should meet regularly at least twice a month.

I would now like to deal with another group of problems under the general heading of democracy and methods of Party leadership. These problems are not new, but we all erred in connection with most of them. It is therefore advisable to restate briefly certain fundamentals of Communist organizational procedure.

We must really practice democratic centralism in our organization. To many members and even functionaries we have to make clear what and what is not democratic centralism.

Stated briefly, democratic centralism is the method of functioning of the Communist organization which combines the maximum democracy in the shaping of policy and the election of all leadership with sufficient centralization of committee authority to guarantee immediate reaction to problems and speedy mobilization of the entire membership and organization around the fulfillment of key tasks. Thus democratic centralism guarantees that all leading committees are elected by the membership and all basic problems are discussed and shaped by the membership. It is the responsibility of the elected leadership to systematically report to the membership on the actions and decisions taken by the higher committee.

Let us examine the shortcomings in how we are functioning. From top to bottom there was too much centralization of thinking as well as authority in individuals, instead of in committees. Policies were brought to mass leaders to carry out, without hammering out such policies in consultation with them. No real effort was made to check the correctness of our policies in the crucible of life and struggle.

New political lines (such as our Teheran line of January, 1944) must not be sprung upon our membership at Madison Square Garden meetings, but must be preceded by a period of discussion with the membership participating in the hammering out of policy. When questions are raised by the people at the bottom, the leadership has a responsibility to recheck its policies and reassure itself of their correctness, or make such modifications as an examination may make necessary. These are some of the things we must correct and never forget again.

At the same time, because we have many new workers in our ranks, who know little about the experiences and traditions of the Communist movement, and who use trade union practices as their yardstick of judgment, we must correct certain wrong ideas about democratic centralism. There are those who want to wipe out the authority of committees to function and make decisions, or want all decisions to be first submitted to a referendum vote. We must explain how such procedure would hinder the effective functions and contribution of the CPA to the labor and people's movement. We must really dramatize in a simple and living way, by everything we do, that democracy is a two-way street—from top to bottom and bottom to top.

All this will be made easier if our leading comrades will establish the practice of, maintaining contact with the membership and the Clubs. In the past only a few of us did this to any extent and in the future this must become the practice of all leaders. Our National Committee should meet more often in full session. A committee system of work should be established in our National Committee which should function under the leadership of the Board and the National Committee.

On the question of cadres, the tasks outlined at the last Na-

tional Committee meeting are still essentially correct and should receive sustained attention. It becomes clear, in accord with our resolution and the lessons the membership is drawing from the discussion, that there must be an early promotion of new and active forces into the leadership of all state committees, as well as the national committee. When that time comes, greater attention should be given to the incorporation of more shop comrades and trade union leaders into our leading committees. Here it is necessary to re-emphasize the need for swifter training and promotion of Negro comrades. In the future attention also should be given to the time of committee meetings, to make it possible for workers, and not only full-time functionaries, to attend.

In the period ahead, when thousands of Communists who have participated in the armed forces return, these comrades must be given the necessary cooperation that will make it possible for them to acquaint themselves with our experiences of the past period. Among them will be found many new forces available for promotion to leadership, together with many old functionaries who will be better equipped to occupy places of leadership.

Under this general heading, it is well to call attention to the need of greater vigilance. Even in the course of this discussion, we should be alert to those who resort to stereotyped phrases that make reference to Trotskyism, or who make leftist provocative proposals. This, of course, must not be confused with the questions asked by honest members for clarification purposes.

We now come to the third general question we wish to place before you for consideration. It seems to us that there is already present in the thinking of our membership the first prerequisites for real organized activity in promoting and extending the circulation of The Daily Worker and The Worker, without any official campaign. First of all the membership in the recent weeks has learned as never before to look to The Daily Worker as an educator through the discussion columns, and a guide to daily mass work, through the editorials and articles.

With the many mass activities in which every Communist must be involved, with the need of influencing the masses of workers on the adoption of correct policies and actions, every member, Club and committee must recognize the indispensability of both The Daily Worker and The Worker. We would therefore recommend, without setting any goals or launching an organized national campaign, that we strive to increase The Daily Worker circulation. Out of town, this means reexamining the entire club-sub activity and carrying through our previous directives. The key to increasing The Worker circulation still rests with a further solution of the renewal problem, and all the districts, including New York, should seriously set about increasing their bundle circulation, on the basis of the immediate activation of our clubs and members.

In connection with our literature distribution we would recommend that during the next 10 weeks special attention be given to securing real mass distribution of certain current pamphlets examining and explaining the present developments in the light of our resolution. Systematic attention should be given to V. J. Jerome's booklet. Lastly, there should be greater attention to a mass distribution of all theoretical literature, with special reference to the Lenin Home Library; Socialism; Utopian and Scientific; the Little Lenin Library; History of the CPSU; the writings of George Dimitrov and other related material. This theoretical literature should be utilized for self study and organized classes.

As a result of this intensive educational campaign and the clarification of policy that will necessarily take place, we can look forward to the perspectives of far greater activity on the part of our membership in the many important fields of mass work and struggle, and the entry into our ranks of many thousands of new members, who thus demonstrate their agreement with the correction of our recent errors.

However, it seems to me, that the working out of any particular campaign related to the building of our organization should await the convening of our National Convention and be planned for fall and winter.

While the question of when we return to the name Communist Party still must be settled, I think we all agree that it must be done. Furthermore, we agree that the CPA must start functioning now as the Marxist vanguard party of the working class. At this time, however, we must declare ourselves as favoring the reorganization of the Communist movement in the southern states.