

SPEECH BY V. J. JEROME*

How DID WE COME to derail our train from the tracks of Marxism-Leninism? This is the question to which our membership and our followers demand an answer.

One factor in particular has stood out in the general range of the discussion of the National Committee meeting, namely, the lack of a really collective leadership in our Party. Because of this, for a number of years our leadership assumed a crassly bureaucratic character, one of whose features was the virtual deification of Earl Browder—by the leadership as well as by the membership—so that often new policies were presented as the outcome of the analysis of an individual, without adequate participation of the collective leadership in forming these policies and with little or no democratic discussion on the part of the members.

Thus, it was possible, by fiat, in the form of a lecture at the Workers School, to present to the membership—and, as is now revealed, also to the leadership, including the Negro leading comrades—a revised theory of the status of the Negro people, which overnight, unpreceded by any collective discussion, negated our Party's Leninist concept of the fundamentally national character of the Negro people's struggle. Thus, too, it was possible for the decision to

dissolve the Communist Party to be railroaded over the membership, which was accorded the privilege of offering proposals for the name of the successor organization in regard to the creation of which it had not been consulted.

This dictatorial centralism is a crime against Bolshevism which cannot be laid at the door solely of one man. To do so would mean to shunt the responsibility from the National Committee and the National Board, and to the degree that it belongs there, from the membership, to an individual whose one-man leadership was in the final analysis the creature of the collective leadership. Self-criticism cannot be reduced to "self-criticizing" Browder.

I agree with the emphasis placed in the Report of Comrade Foster on Comrade Browder's major responsibility for the un-Marxian line we have followed, though I must take exception to his excessive apportioning of Browder's responsibility. Adherence to Marxism in Party policy is always basically a responsibility which every member and leader must assume, even though the degree of responsibility may vary in accordance with the entrusted task and position. Because our membership was deprived of the Party-democratic basis for exercising its responsibility, the responsibility in this situation falls all the more heavily on the

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leadership.

The collective leadership entrusted by the membership with formulating policies and leading in their execution is answerable in the first place for guiding the work of the Party by Marxist-Leninist theory, whether or not the leadership has succeeded in being collective. Only because of the default of the collective leadership did one-man leadership come to be a fact in our Party.

But how did this default come about in the case of tried and seasoned leading comrades? To answer simply that they were prisoners of an undemocratic leadership arrangement is to beg the question.

It would be a vulgarization of the truth to assume that the leaders and members of our Party subjected themselves to the role of "yes men" or that they were mesmerized into accepting the line by Browder's talents of leadership. No! The answer is not to be found in such subjective evaluations; the answer is profoundly political.

We must search for it primarily in the objective conditions obtaining in the United States during the Roosevelt decade, in which the situation that was so favorable for building the democratic coalition also brought with it dangerous currents of bourgeois influences against which we did not guard ourselves.

We must also search for the answer in the traditions and the political level of the American working class—the subjective factor—even though

in recent years our labor movement has made great strides forward along the road of organization and independent political action. These objective and subjective factors demand a searching analysis on our part. In my remarks, however, I wish to limit myself to the factor of Browder's leadership.

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One thing stands out. We were impressed by the definite contributions which Comrade Browder has made to our Party.

These contributions, I submit, had within them very early the seeds of opportunism and revisionism. But in our readiness to welcome the positive aspects of those contributions we allowed ourselves to be uncritical of their negative aspects.

What were these contributions? It was first of all the fact that, coming into leadership following the expulsion of the Lovestoneites, when the conditions had been created for Party unity, Comrade Browder helped to unify our organization. Our Party was transformed from a house of discord, from a factional house divided against itself, into a consolidated Party. We were avid for unity, we wanted to forget the nightmare of factionalism.

In our great eagerness for unity, however, we permitted a very real and actual disunity to grow up under the cover of unity. For, in the symbol of our unification, Earl Browder, we tended to pool, not only our confidence, but increasingly also our in-

dependence of judgment and evaluation, our basic democratic duties and rights as Communists to test and re-test, collectively and each for himself, the policies and decisions we disciplined ourselves to carry through. We forgot that unity is real when it is based on a thorough and democratically arrived at agreement on principle. Our unity became a unity on the surface based on avoidance of discussion.

Secondly, Browder's teachings on the American revolutionary and democratic traditions are undoubtedly a very important contribution which obviously did much to enhance Comrade Browder's prestige in the eyes of our membership and leadership.

The fascist distortion of national traditions for racist and chauvinist ends impelled Dimitrov to remind the working class that it was the inheritor of the valuable traditions of national struggle for freedom, that in the present stage of history the working class must come forward as the savior of the nation. Dimitrov proclaimed in 1935 that national nihilism is opposed to Marxism. It was in this setting that Comrade Browder brought to our attention the need for a study of American history.

But had we examined this contribution as Marxists, we would have found a definite one-sidedness in Browder's approach to the democratic heritage in the nation's past. The proletarian element in the American tradition which Comrade

Browder asked us to take over was virtually absent. I think that we should go further and say that the democratic tradition of our nation's revolutionary beginnings which Comrade Browder stressed were submitted to us, not through Marxian critical evaluation of the past, but by and large as a bourgeois-democratic heritage to be taken over on a bourgeois-democratic level.

But our inheritance of bourgeois-democratic traditions has to pass through the crucible of Socialist consciousness; it has to reject as well as accept; it has to add our own to that which it inherits from others; otherwise we shall be doing nothing more than renovate capitalism, even though it may be the best in capitalism. How flagrantly we failed to do this was reflected in our now abandoned slogan, "Communism is Twentieth Century Americanism." It is shown in the position of primacy which the Constitution of the Communist Political Association accords the traditions of Washington, Jefferson, Paine, etc.

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A further factor making for the enhancement of Comrade Browder's prestige was his contribution toward leading our Party in carrying out the counsel of the *Open Letter* of 1933 to put an end to our Party's sectarianism and to broaden out our Party's connections with the working masses. We saw only the positive aspect of the contribution; what we did not see was the creeping oppor-

tunism which, because unchecked, eventually bogged us down into revisionism.

The advice of the *Open Letter* was not only to root ourselves in the working class, among the basic industrial workers, but to do so in order to be an effective vanguard of the working class, both in its direct economic struggles and in whatever alliances it was destined to enter.

Comrade Browder, proceeding from his idealized conception of the progressive bourgeoisie, did not guide the Party to lead the working class toward the full performance of its role in the alliances which it had to enter in order to build the democratic coalition against fascism.

Missing was the Leninist art and science of alliances and compromises. The contingent and transient bourgeois ally in the war against the Axis was presented in the pattern of natural and lasting ally. The alliance was conceived undialectically, as a unity of opposites without the conflict of opposites. The compromise entailed in this alliance was presented as a harmonious blending of the interests of the two basic contending classes in our country.

No one can belittle Comrade Browder's contributions toward promoting American-Soviet friendship; yet as we look back, we find that this one war which combined the Socialist and capitalist states against Hitler combined these states in Comrade Browder's eyes into a one world in which the struggle of the two worlds

was obliterated—Willkie's "One World"!

What was true in foreign political relations had its counterpart in the nation—a conception of national unity in which the class struggle, instead of being seen as transferred into the framework of national unity, came to be regarded as something disruptive of national unity. The workers were discouraged from struggle against the war profiteers and trusts with the slogan that "Equality of sacrifice" was Lassalleian. Instead of the backbone of national unity in the war, the working class was seen as the back to carry the burden of the war.

There is no cause for complacency in the fact that we have struggled against sectarianism. Marxism bids us beware against two main danger-paths that lead to sectarianism—not only adolescent "Leftism," but Right opportunism. The former, which proceeds from fear of "contamination" by the masses, leads to sterility and decrepitude. An American example of this concealment of the "vanguard" light under a bushel is the political fossil known as the Socialist Labor Party. But this divorce from the working class can also come about through Right opportunist policies of "broadening out." Failure of a Communist Party to connect itself as effective political leader of the working masses together with whom the broadening out must proceed; failure to be truly alert to their day-to-day needs, to promote their or-

ganized strength and advance their class position in every situation and with every policy, means essentially a weakening of the vanguard role and must lead inevitably to a weakening of the vanguard's ties with the working class, to an isolation of the vanguard—to sectarianism.

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What do Comrade Browder's contributions have in common? An underestimation of the role of the working class in our nation permeates each of them. Whenever such an underestimation occurs, the role of the bourgeoisie is correspondingly enhanced in one form or another. When these ideas are introduced into the Party organism, a fundamental disturbance must be the consequence after a time. Bureaucracy feeds on it, inner democracy is enfeebled, and the Party, while nominally remaining in existence, fails its role and liquidates its true being. The opportunism which we are now fighting imperceptibly diluted our Marxist-Leninist understanding.

With such ideas current our Party could not develop as political leader of the working class.

Formally our Party was consolidated, but the latent and finally expressed opportunism prevented it from becoming a monolithic Marxist-Leninist vanguard. Such a vanguard Party requires a basic, unswerving confidence in the working class as the leading force for progress in the nation. Coupled with this confidence must be the willingness

to learn from, as well as to teach the working class. Such a vanguard Party must, through the championship of the day-to-day needs of the working class, hold before it the light of Socialism.

Had these requisites been fulfilled, we would not have had to deceive ourselves as to our role in the nation. We were irked by a persistent and warning question: Why, in this super-industrialized country, are we such a negligible force? We consoled ourselves with exaggerations of our *influence* as against our organized strength. Unconsciously we tried to compensate for our obvious deficiencies with such exaggerations. We began to look upon Comrade Browder as "speaker to the nation." More and more Browder became the statesman, the advisor to all classes. And more and more we gloried in our tribune to the nation. We tended to forget our own inefficiency as Marxists when Browder set himself up as the efficiency expert for the nation, and particularly its "enlightened" bourgeoisie. By no means does this criticism imply that Communists should not address themselves to the nation. Communists would fail the democratic coalition of the nation in which they participate unless they sought out every possible avenue to address themselves to all the democratic forces that can be rallied to struggle in a common front against the main reactionary enemy. What should never be forgotten, however, is that no Marxian can speak to the

nation except as champion and organizer of the working class. When this is forgotten, the nature of the vanguard is distorted, the inner life of the Party languishes, bureaucracy is the natural outgrowth, and collective leadership degenerates into one-man leadership.

The question naturally arises: Why did I accept and fight for this opportunist, revisionist line?

In evaluating my work in the course of recent years I come to the conclusion that I failed to exercise sufficient vigilance and to do my share in struggling against the permeation of bourgeois ideology into the ranks of the working class and its vanguard. Especially in the United States, where the strongest imperialist-capitalist class uses the most powerful propaganda agencies and media, open and subtle, a Marxist should have been conscious of the danger of this permeation. The advent of the New Deal Administration marked the fact that American capitalism could no longer depend on the specific American Social-Democracy, or A.F. of L. leadership, as it did in World War I, for holding the working class in check. The monster unemployment demonstrations led by the small Communist Party in 1930 and the ensuing great wave of strikes brought the ruling class of this country to the choice: either the policy of Hoover repression and playing with fire, or the adoption of a "New Deal." This New Deal meant a direct approach

of the American bourgeois administration to the working class; it meant concessions to the working class in the form of legislative provisions for collective bargaining and social insurance. At the same time, it meant a policy of investment for securing the goodwill of the working class. In that situation, despite the growth and strengthening of the labor movement, the permeation of bourgeois ideology into labor's ranks proceeded rapidly. While continuing and even intensifying its ideological pressures upon the working class through petty bourgeois, reformist carriers of its theories, the bourgeoisie now operated through direct transmission. We did not grasp the full import of the danger of direct imperialist-bourgeois influences upon the working class and its vanguard. We were not sensitive, specifically, to the danger constantly present in the encirclement of the irrational ideas of pragmatism—the court philosophy of American imperialism—whose effects could all too often have been noted in our recent forecasts and tactics, which were marked by anything but the cogency of Marxian scientific prediction. In view of all this, I must assume my share of responsibility in not sensing that alertness to the danger of bourgeois influences was all the more necessary because of the favorable political factors brought about by the Roosevelt Administration.

True, like others among us, I often

had misgivings; occasions arose when I chafed under flagrant departures from Marxism-Leninism, which I told myself were "vulgarizations of our line." I failed, however, to draw the full conclusions from such dissatisfactions and to realize that the line was the matrix of those vulgarizations.

Let me take an example from my own work. At the time of the dissolution of the Communist Party, I wrote two articles for *The Communist* on the role of the Communist vanguard. That writing was motivated by the need to offset liquidatory tendencies and moods which had manifested themselves in our ranks. The thesis was that the vanguard is constant, even though its form may change under changing historic conditions. To this end I drew upon examples from the world history of the vanguard, as far back as the Communist League of 1847.

Subsequently, I set about preparing these articles for publication in pamphlet form. However, in examining the development of the analysis I found that I could not proceed; for somehow I could not fit the theory and the historical lessons of the Marxian vanguard to the situation of our dissolution. Accordingly, I gave up the project. I failed, however, to draw the full conclusions from the difficulty I encountered and to probe deeper into the main ideological source of the disharmony between our practice and our theory with respect to the dissolution of

our Party.

With no desire to lessen my self-criticism, I believe it will be helpful to a fuller understanding of the factors that contributed to my errors if I state that the undemocratic atmosphere which pervaded our entire organization, from the branches to the highest committees, conduced to holding back and even repressing individual initiative in thought and action. In yielding to this atmosphere, I mistakenly felt that I was exercising the political virtues of loyalty, discipline, and maintenance of Party unity. Actually, I was abandoning the elementary duty of every Communist constantly to evaluate his work and himself in the light of Marxist-Leninist theory.

Yet, to rest upon these explanations would mean in reality but to explain away that which needs to be explained. As a Marxian propagandist and an editor of the theoretical organ of our Party, recognizing the special gravity of my errors, I can come to but one conclusion: My acceptance and my participation in promoting a policy that was in essence revisionist proceeded from my need to achieve full mastery of Marxism-Leninism, to strengthen myself in Bolshevik vigilance.

Yes, comrades, we need loyalty, we need discipline and unity, we need to reaffirm these qualities with manifold intensity; but primarily and at all times we need to affirm our loyalty to the working-class cause, to the science of Marxism.