

A Theoretical and Political Magazine of Scientific Socialism

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The Communist Party Convention

An Editorial

THE RECENT National Convention of the Communist Party was undoubtedly one of the most critically important gatherings ever held by the Communist movement in this country. Paradoxically, this convention—held at a time when the Communist Party is weaker organizationally than it has been in many years—received infinitely more spotlighting and publicity throughout the country than almost any of its conventions in history. Such publicity is not accorded by the politically-competent capitalist press of our country to a movement that no longer has any impact upon the scene.

The challenge that faced this Convention was, in a new form, the same general one that has been met by the Party at other critical moments in the past—the challenge of responding to major changes in conditions.

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The founding convention of the Communist Party met in 1919 under the influence of such tremendous events as the first socialist revolu-

tion, the end of the first World War, and the failure of the socialists in Germany. The founding of the Workers Party in December, 1921, unified the various Communist groups and marked the Party's emerging out of the worst infantile sectarianism and the state of illegality brought about by the Palmer raids.

The Seventh Convention of the Party in June, 1930, following the defection of the Trotskyite-Cannon group and the Right-opportunist group led by Jay Lovestone, took place at a time when the economic crash had already unmasked the false theories of the "new capitalism," "permanent prosperity," etc., and had demonstrated the Party's ability to give leadership to the masses as exemplified in the historic March 6th demonstrations of the unemployed. And though the Party had been reduced to only 7,000 dues-paying members, the morale of the Party was high and it confidently faced the future, more consolidated ideologically than ever before in its history. Its subsequent growth of in-

fluence and numbers justified this confidence.

In July 1945 the Party found it necessary to adjust its line to the realities of the situation immediately following World War II, correcting errors of revisionism put forward by Browder. The Party emerged from the situation with its organization and the bulk of its membership intact, with strong ties to important sections of the labor movement, the Negro people, intellectuals, and others.

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The present Convention in its turn was faced with the necessity also of adjusting to a new situation, a situation resulting basically from the great changes following World War II. This situation has perhaps best been summed up in the proposition that the emergence of socialism as a world system is the chief feature of our present era.

Within the country, the atmosphere has likewise changed considerably from that at the height of the Korean War when the last Convention took place. Since then McCarthyism reached its peak and was driven back by the American people. Geneva has raised the hopes for peaceful coexistence as a practical goal. The AFL and CIO have been re-united after nearly 20 years of chronic split, and the liberation struggle of the Negro people has taken on a new dimension.

Yet, in contrast to the past conventions referred to, the Party this time found itself facing a most severe crisis. This crisis was described

in the words of the convention resolution as follows:

It is necessary for all members of the Communist Party to face up soberly to the fact that in this period the Party suffered heavy organizational losses, declined in political influence in many areas of work, became dangerously isolated from important sectors of the labor and people's movement, is confronted with the jeopardizing of the Marxist press, and that in general the Party is faced with a serious crisis of a political, ideological and organizational nature.

It seems to us that the gravity of the crisis was occasioned largely by the fact that this time the Party was exceedingly late in coping with the changed situation. For years its most authoritative leadership had been in jail or scattered, and the Party as a whole subjected to the most massive and brutal attack by every agent of the capitalist class and government.

Inevitably when the Party reassembled its leadership at the beginning of 1956, not all sectors, either in the leadership or among the membership, fully or immediately realized the gravity of the situation. To be sure there were exaggerations as regards some errors, and underestimation of the Party's past achievements and positive role, but in time the overwhelming majority of the Party, despite its pride in its great contributions and many achievements, had to face up to the crisis. The above section of the resolution adopted by overwhelming vote of the

convention shows that the Party was ready to meet the situation.

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Without recognition of the seriousness of the situation it would have been impossible to seek out its deeper roots and to lay the basis for overcoming it. In the year-long discussion and at the Convention there were wide differences of emphasis as to the causes, some laying the stress on the objective situation and the attacks against the Party, others on the Party's sectarian errors. The resolution of the convention summed it up as follows:

Was it inevitable that the Party should become so isolated and suffer such organizational and political losses as it did? The answer must be NO. Against the background of the objective situation and its consequences, the errors and long-standing weaknesses of our Party had a particularly damaging effect. . . .

In correcting such errors, the Resolution points out:

In our struggle for a mass policy we base ourselves on the following Marxist-Leninist propositions:

- a) that both Left-sectarianism and Right-opportunism have objective roots in reality—in the system under which we live;
- b) that the struggle must be conducted on both fronts, with the main emphasis against that which threatens the Marxist line of our Party at the given moment.

The most important mistakes made in the period under review were Left-sectarian in character. These Left-sectarian mistakes, in the context of sharp

attack against the Party, are the main reason for the unprecedented degree to which it was possible for Big Business and its political representatives to isolate the Party.

To end its isolation and expand its mass work, the main task of the Party today is to overcome completely the influence of Left-sectarian estimates, policies and tactics in all fields of work.

In the process of carrying out the main task, the Party must struggle against existent Right-opportunist tendencies, combatting them at all times. This is especially necessary in view of the extremely sharp turn which the Party is now making in many of its basic policies. The necessary struggle against Right-opportunist errors must be carried on in such a way as not to weaken the main task.

The impact of the Khrushchev revelations was a major factor throughout the year-long discussion that culminated in the Convention. These revelations of the harmful effects of the Stalin policies over a long period of time, only served to emphasize what was becoming clear to many in the Party—the need to put an end to uncritical attitudes towards the views of Marxists of other countries. Needless to say, the shocking disclosures also had—if only temporarily—a tendency to disorient some, at the same time that they caused many to deepen their thinking.

The heart of the Convention's analysis as to the causes for the "serious crisis of a political, ideological and organizational nature," that which constitutes the basis for the "new course" and without which

the crisis could not have been met, is contained in the following passage of the resolution:

The roots of these errors are not to be found in the events of the past ten years alone.

The Marxist movement in our country has suffered historically from dogmatic application of Marxist theory to the American scene. The Communist Party inherited these weaknesses. Insufficient development of the independent theoretical work of the Party over the past decades has contributed towards our doctrinaire acceptance and mechanical application of many theoretical propositions.

Our Party also suffered from an oversimplified approach to and uncritical acceptance of many views of Marxists and Marxist parties in other countries.

Bureaucratic methods of leadership, failure to develop inner-Party democracy and a frequent intolerant attitude to the people we worked with have been in large measure responsible for our inability to correct mistakes in time as well as for much of our sectarianism. All these factors are inter-related; each helped to reinforce the other.

This is far from a routine or superficial analysis. A careful study of these conclusions and a review of the Party's past experience will show that here are some fundamental, new propositions. They serve to explain why the Party has repeatedly made the same mistakes and not corrected them in time, and at the same time provide the key to the successful outcome of the Convention and a substantial basis for facing the future with confidence.

This new approach is already embodied in the Convention documents. All the major decisions of the Convention reflect this new thinking. As regards the approach to theory this can be seen in the Preamble to the Party Constitution which states:

The Communist Party bases its theory generally on the democratic heritage of mankind and particularly on the principles of scientific socialism as developed by Karl Marx, Frederick Engels and V. I. Lenin. These universally valid principles, the Communist Party of the U.S.A. interprets, applies and strives to develop further in accordance with the requirements of the American class struggle, democratic traditions and customs.

As regards relationship to Marxists of other countries, the resolution declares:

... The Communist Party recognizes that over the years it held certain wrong and oversimplified concepts of what its relations should be to other Marxist parties. The Party tended to accept uncritically many views of Marxists in other countries. Not all these views were correct; some did not correspond to American conditions. The Party also viewed uncritically developments in the Soviet Union and other Socialist countries. It mistakenly thought that any public criticism of the views or policies of the Marxist parties of these countries would weaken the bonds of international working-class solidarity or bring comfort to the enemies of peace and socialism.

In abandoning the earlier idealis-

tic and uncritical attitude towards the lands of socialism, while recognizing their historic role and achievements, the Party has strengthened its ability to promote true proletarian internationalism.

This new, creative approach and broader understanding of theory has already resulted in the elaboration of many policies in a new way. The new emphasis on peaceful coexistence as a *practical possibility* has broadened the approach to the struggle for peace. The American Road to Socialism, while put forward in earlier years, including the idea of peaceful transition, likewise takes on more content and reality. The Party now places the struggle for an anti-monopoly coalition as its main strategic aim along that path. And from such a coalition which could break the power of the traditional enemies of the American people—the monopolies—it believes the American people could advance in a constitutional, democratic and peaceful transition to socialism.

Addressing itself also to the problem of the unification of progressive and socialist-minded currents among the American people, the Convention also adopted a new attitude towards social democracy, noting the differentiation within its ranks, viewing its supporters as potential allies in the labor and anti-monopoly struggle instead of, as in the past, as bearers of a trend which was to be organizationally defeated and liquidated.

Likewise it recognized the possibility of a number of parties of socialism existing side by side and

affirmed the perspective and aim of an eventual united Marxist party of socialism.

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To those who kept themselves informed of the progress of the discussion, including the various articles that have been published in *Political Affairs*, and have pondered the sharp differences, the proposals for far more drastic changes, and on the other hand the charges of revisionism, it may come as a surprise that such a high degree of unity was reached at the Convention. Certainly the enemies of the Party had engaged in considerable speculation on the inevitability of a split at the Convention. At the same time, within the Party, many had feared that the Party would be liquidated in one form or another and its basic theoretical foundation—Marxism - Leninism — abandoned, while others despaired of the capacity of the Party to break with its old sectarian policies and practices and chart a new course in line with the needs of the present situation.

Some have drawn the conclusion that there was no real unity achieved but instead a compromise of principle. We do not believe this is borne out by the facts. If argument and debate does not have the purpose of reaching agreement through arriving at a more correct and acceptable view than that held previously by each proponent, then what would be the use of conventions and collective discussions altogether? Thus, basing themselves on the main line of the Draft Resolution, the Con-

vention strengthened the Resolution, rounding out certain propositions which had tended towards one-sidedness. The new draft constitution was also adopted with only minor changes.

On the much-discussed question of name and form, the Convention took the following position:

This convention goes on record to affirm the continuation of the Communist Party of the U.S.A. Our chief task is to strengthen, rebuild and consolidate the Communist Party and overcome its isolation.

This convention opposes the transformation of the Party into a political or educational association.

Although we oppose endless debate on this question, this should not close the door to all constructive exploration and discussion of the subject as may be organized by the incoming National Committee.

We recognize that some ideas have been brought forward in this discussion that are revisionist in character. However, it would be wrong to label all proposals for change in name and form as revisionist per se.

These actions do not represent compromise, but instead principled agreement.

Not the least among the reasons for the high degree of unity was the conscious desire of the delegates to unite the Party and avoid the dangers of a split or of continuing factionalism. But the factors that made the unity possible were: first, the new approach to theory which loosened the rigidity with which the membership had been trained to regard theo-

retical and political questions; second, the opportunity in the course of the discussion to test ideas against the events actually transpiring in the world; and third, the growing democratization of the Party which had already been under way in the course of the whole discussion without waiting for its practices to be formalized in the new constitution at the convention.

Thus, the lengthy discussion had been the most democratic in the Party's history and the Convention in which it culminated was likewise the most democratic ever held by the Party. It was the democratic character of the convention that made the biggest impression upon the non-Communist observers who while having reservations and mixed opinions on other aspects, bore witness publicly to its democracy.

The early announcement that the constitution would formalize the right of dissent likewise played a major role in encouraging the membership to examine all questions boldly, free from a dogmatic or doctrinaire approach, testing their opinions in life and recognizing the possibility of honest differences on questions within a united Party. The new Constitution confirmed and guaranteed the advances in inner-Party democracy. This was further demonstrated in the direct representation in the national leadership given to the State organization.

The Convention, by its very nature and the issues that had to be debated and settled in a short four days, was unable to give adequate

attention to a proposed program of action or to the tasks in connection with saving the Marxist press, especially the *Daily Worker* and the *Worker*. Nevertheless the various resolutions and documents adopted by the Convention add up to a general program of struggle. This is true regarding the general line towards an anti-monopoly coalition, the resolution in support of the historic struggle of the Negro people for freedom and equality, and the resolution in support of labor's struggle for improved economic conditions.

That these struggles are growing in dimensions needs no extended demonstration. The struggle in the South is taking on new features as the white supremacists more and more find their legal resources exhausted, and move in the direction of increasing violence. In regard to this question the Convention in numerous ways dramatized its emphasis on the task of winning full citizenship for the Negro people in the South as the Nation's Number One Democratic Task. A new and broad anti-labor offensive is shaping up in state and national legislation and the demonstration of 10,000 workers from all over the state at Indianapolis, shows that labor, even if belatedly, is beginning to mobilize. The recent farmers' strike in the New York milk-shed has again dramatized the chronic depressed situation of the farmers. The events of Academic Freedom Week show a new

stirring among the students.

The decisions of the Convention, when mastered by the leadership and membership of the Party, should equip them to give support to these and kindred struggles in a new way, that will ultimately result in the overcoming of the Party's isolation from the basic organizations of labor and the people. The struggle against right-to-work laws, the issues arising from the Senate labor investigations, the struggle in the South and the fight for civil rights legislation, are all fields where the Party can doubtless play a constructive, vanguard role.

Many questions brought up in the course of the discussion, of course, remained unresolved. Some of the theoretical questions will undoubtedly receive further study in preparation for the Party program that is to be worked out in the coming year. Others will, of course, be the subject of continued examination in theory and practice by the organizations of the Party. But it seems clear that the Party has taken a decisive step forward in grappling with the new situation and has taken the correct road towards re-establishing its position as an American Marxist working-class party dedicated to socialism and re-establishing its ties with the labor and people's movement. In this as in its entire work, we believe the Convention has made a contribution to the American working class and people.