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James P. Cannon in 1938.

JAMES P. CANNON 1890-1974

IN DEFENCE OF A GREAT REVOLUTIONARY

by Tim Wohlforth

In this edition of "Trotskyism Today" we publish the first part of an article by Tim Wohlforth, the former National Secretary of the US Workers League (sympathising section of the International Committee of the Fourth International).

Wohlforth wrote the article in reply to a series by Mike Banda of the British Workers Revolutionary Party, published in *Workers Press* in October 1974, entitled *James P. Cannon: A critical assessment of a pioneer Trotskyist*.

We have many points of disagreement with Comrade Wohlforth. But on at least one point we are certainly agreed. The record has to be set straight on the life and achievements of Cannon who was truly a "great revolutionary".

We agree also that this question is not simply one for American Trotskyists. The history of the Socialist Workers Party in the USA is central to the history of world Trotskyism. For this reason we reprint this article as the beginning of a more

serious study of some of the questions it raises, and in order to broaden and develop the discussion on the history of the Fourth International as begun in our document *Fourth International: Problems and Tasks*.

A fuller response to Wohlforth's views, taking up some of our political differences with his article, will appear (together with the second part) in the *Supplement to Socialist Press* 27.

In reading this first part, however, we must not forget that Wohlforth's position at times sharply reflects the difficult conditions under which he was effectively driven out of the Workers League by the WRP General Secretary in the end months of 1974.

It is clear that in the aftermath of this experience, Wohlforth's attitudes to certain issues had not been clearly and objectively reworked when this article was written. Some positions reflect lingering traces of Healyism - and some a foretaste of Wohlforth's present shift towards the US Socialist Workers Party.

In particular we disagree with his very one-sided analysis of youth work,

which appears in the later passages in the article, and also the rather slanted view he gives of the 1953 split in the Fourth International, where he portrays Cannon's role in an excessively favourable light (especially in view of Cannon's and the SWP's subsequent positions on the International). And we feel Wohlforth has deliberately underplayed his own role in creating the same one-sided approach to Cannon as he now criticises in Banda.

But most of all we disagree with the way in which Wohlforth has now moved from this necessary re-examination of the life and work of Cannon, to public statements expressing support for the present-day Socialist Workers Party of the USA which in its policies in many ways represents only the palest negation of Cannon's long fight for a revolutionary combat party based firmly in the bedrock of the US labour movement.

We will expand on these questions and detail some of the background to Wohlforth's removal from the Workers League in the next edition of *Trotskyism Today*.

Introduction: The History of History

The question of James P. Cannon and the history of American Trotskyism has been a central concern of mine since my earliest days in the movement in 1955 and 1956 when I broke with Max Shachtman, joined the Socialist Workers Party, and contributed to the founding of the Young Socialist Alliance. The fight with Shachtman required a whole assessment of this history, particularly Trotsky's *In Defence of Marxism* and Cannon's *Struggle For A Proletarian Party*. In that period this history was taken very seriously and those two works were considered in the SWP, together with Cannon's *History of American Trotskyism*, as the "bibles" of the movement.

I recognised that it was insufficient to break with Shachtman empirically over his right-wing policies and inaugurated an historical study of the Shachtmanite movement, which produced *What Makes Shachtman Run?*, the only history of that movement. I also made a study of Trotsky's *Revolution Betrayed*, coming to a position of defence of the workers states and complete hostility to Stalinism, from which I have never budged.

The ensuing years were important particularly for an understanding of the early American communist movement. It was in this period that Theodore Draper wrote his two invaluable volumes on early communism and James Cannon compiled the material later published as the *First Ten Years Of American Communism*. This material only made it more clear that those who wished to seriously prepare for the future struggle of the American working class must first understand the past development of the working class movement and its relationship to the international workers movement.

It was the 1961-63 struggle which broke out within the ranks of the International Committee over reunification with the United Secretariat forces (the remnants of the original group around Pablo from which the International Committee had split in 1953) which raised so sharply the issue of James Cannon and the relationship between the American Trotskyist movement and the Fourth International as a whole. At that time Gerry Healy insisted that any reunification with Pabloism required first of all a full and frank discussion of the causes of the original split with Pablo in 1953.

In February 1963 I was called over to England, as I would be many times after that date, for consultations. This was my first such trip. The central question we discussed was precisely the history of the SWP.

I undertook a whole study of the history of American Trotskyism. This study produced *The Struggle For Marxism in the United States*. This book remains, ten years after it was written, the only history of American Trotskyism from its origins to today.

BENEFICIAL

This intervention on the part of Gerry Healy had a beneficial effect on the development of our movement in the United States - the American Committee for the Fourth International and later the Workers League. Our movement was built in a continuous struggle to understand this history. We did not always achieve a proper understanding but it was always our central concern. In 1971, when we first gathered young workers around our party, we held a special school in the Catskills devoted to the history of the Fourth International. The pamphlet *Towards A History of The Fourth International* was a product of that school. When in 1973 we organised trail-blazing teams in the industrial Midwest to set up new branches in cities which had seen socialist mayors, massive votes for Debs, the earliest efforts of pioneer American Communists (the *Daily Worker* was the outgrowth of a Cleveland paper, the *Toiler*), and the great sit-down strikes of the 1930s, our comrades studied Cannon's *Speeches To The Party*.

I believe it is safe to say that no other movement in any country devoted as much effort as we did to an education of our cadres in the history of the movements which had preceded us. We thought that in so doing we were acting as part of an international development. It now appears that this kind of study only took place within our own ranks. The rest of the International Committee was insulated completely from it.

What Gerry Healy proposed that we do, he himself never undertook. This is true in two related senses. Gerry Healy never undertook an education of his cadres in the true history of British Trotskyism nor were they educated in a history of American Trotskyism. The two questions were, in any event, completely intertwined. Because the British movement grew up primarily after the death of Trotsky, it was very much the product of the post-Trotsky Fourth International.

While the British comrades played an active role in the European Secretariat and collaborated closely with Pablo

for several years, the *real strengths* of British Trotskyism came from Gerry Healy's collaboration with James P. Cannon and the American SWP. It was Cannon who aided Healy when he broke from the centrist anti-internationalist Workers International League and brought a small but critically important group into the official section of the Fourth International during the war period. It was Cannon who supported Healy in his struggle against the petty-bourgeois Haston group during the post-war years when Pablo was giving covert support to this rotten group. And, of course, it was Cannon again who Healy followed in 1953 making his own break with Pablo in the process and ensuring the continuity of Trotskyism in England.

It was Cannon who wrote to Gerry Healy in 1953:

"If one were to undertake to write the real history of British Trotskyism, he would have to set the *starting point* (Cannon's emphasis) as the day and date on which your group finally tore itself loose from the Haston regime and started its own independent work. What happened before that is nothing but a series of squandered opportunities, material for the pre-history of British Trotskyism."

Why is it that Gerry Healy never undertook that task to write the real history of British Trotskyism? Why is it he never educated his movement in the real history of American Trotskyism? Certainly it was not because of lack of intellectual forces to help with the work for in that respect our small group was far more impoverished (our history of American Trotskyism was written when we had nine members).

It can only be that Gerry Healy approached this history *factionally and subjectively*. He did not wish it to be known among his membership that he, Gerry Healy, had made many mistakes in his life, that he, Gerry Healy, owed so much to James P. Cannon who was now his political opponent, and that the organization which he today opposed had in the past made such a major contribution to the development of the Fourth International. It could only be that Healy, who urged us to do what he would not do, who urged his own members to study such distant events as the Cromwellian period, trained a whole generation of British Trotskyists in ignorance of their own history and with only a most distorted picture of the history of the Fourth International.

Once Healy freed himself in this fashion from the grip of history (history of course continued to exist outside of Healy's head and is already placing Healy in his proper subjective historical dustbin) he could act as he saw fit — that is arbitrarily, subjectively. At the same time the study of the Marxist method was abstracted out of historical development, separated from political practice and political program, and in an idealist fashion used as a whip to maintain a little sect.

RESPONSIBILITY

But the crime was even greater. After all, the responsibility which fell to Healy in 1961-63 was for more than his immediate supporters. All who aspire to a leadership role in any country have a responsibility for revolutionaries in all countries. How could the confusion within the ranks of the United Secretariat be sorted out, how could the healthy forces in the SWP be reached, if their own history with its positive accomplishments was factionally distorted and they faced only a factional hostility? The ill-conceived and unprepared unification of 1963 was not just the responsibility of the SWP leadership. Gerry Healy made his own contribution through his refusal to fight for the real, true and objective history of the Fourth International, and to fight consistently and non-factionally for the cadres of the SWP.

We, who were within the SWP, found ourselves in a most difficult position. Gerry Healy in 1962 correctly urged us to fight for the majority within the SWP, to orient towards the forces around Farrell Dobbs and Tom Kerry, to avoid factional issues which would create a distance from those forces, and to remain as long as possible within the SWP as loyal party builders. We attempted to carry out just such a policy and broke with Robertson over precisely those issues. But meantime back in England Healy was conducting a polemic of another character a polemic so factional that it contradicted the tactical line we in the U.S., in good faith, sought to carry out. The result was that we remained isolated within the SWP and important cadres — including the SWP leadership — were never reached.

As this article makes clear, our pre-occupation with James P. Cannon is not a matter of parochial concern within the history of our own country, important as that country may be to the future of socialism internationally. The SWP was the only real party with a trained indigenous leadership to emerge in the 1930s in the Fourth International. For this reason its history is very much at the heart of the development of the Fourth International. Ignorance of its history is ignorance of the history of the Fourth International. Such ignorance is today the situation in most countries of the world.

NEGLIGENT

The European sections of the United Secretariat were and are largely dominated by the Mandel-Frank forces who have reasons even more than Gerry Healy to keep this history from their membership. The former French section of the IC, the OCI, has also been criminally negligent in this respect. Even Trotsky's classic *In Defence of Marxism* was available only as a fragment until the last two or three years. To our knowledge Cannon's writings are still unknown in the major languages of the world outside English though we are happy to hear that a section of the *Struggle for a Proletarian Party* is now being published in French in Canada. The new young cadres who have turned to Trotskyism all over the world are today almost totally ignorant of this vital history and its critical lessons for constructing a Trotskyist movement today.

The SWP has made an important contribution recently in two important publishing projects. The first is the publication of Cannon's *Speeches To The Party*, his writings on the Cochran fight and perhaps his most important work. Second is the publication as part of the *Education For Socialists* series of all the documents and much of the correspondence from both sides of the split in 1953.

This polemic with Banda is more than a polemic with Banda. It is an attempt to develop an understanding of the history of American Trotskyism and its relationship with the Fourth International free of Healy's factional distortions which also found expression in my own early writings, particularly *The Struggle for Marxism in the United States*. I wish to draw the reader's attention to two more recently

early period — *Towards A History of the Fourth International and In Defence of Trotskyism — An Answer To Those Who Vilify Our History*. Both of these were written with the approval and encouragement of Gerry Healy, in fact he read over and made corrections on the text of the latter pamphlet, but the articles never were run in the *Workers Press* nor were the pamphlets distributed in England. Again we were encouraged in a certain objectivity to our own history as long as that objectivity never crossed the Atlantic Ocean.

There is another interesting side to these pamphlets. They contained polemics against David Fender and Philip Pasan who represented small tendencies which broke from the SWP claiming to represent a left wing and orthodox alternative to the SWP. The position taken in the pamphlets was that they represented nothing of the kind because of their slanders of the early history of the Fourth International including the 1953 split with Pablo. Today Healy has joined the ranks of Pasan and Fender and we are forced to make the same political judgment of him.

James P. Cannon was a great revolutionary. This was Trotsky's opinion and it is ours. He deserves an objective history. More important, the young cadres of the movement internationally can only be trained for the tremendous tasks we now face with such a history. We hope this article assists in a process of study of this history which must now go on in all countries. It is, together with each of our efforts to build the Trotskyist movement, the best way I know of paying tribute to Cannon during this, the year of his death.



Top left, Healy, WRP General Secretary
Left, Wohlforth, above, Banda.

The Method of Historical Materialism

Marx always insisted that we enter history backwards. This, of course, creates great difficulties for comprehending history as the developments under study developed forwards, not backwards.

What this means is that whether we wish to be conscious about it or not, *all* historical writing begins from the present and this element cannot be removed from historical writing. It is the events of the present which shape the very questions which compel us to study history for the answers. The present forces us to move backward into history. The historical questions under discussion are therefore always contemporary.

As we move backward into history, we must understand that our movement into history is contradictory in direction to the movement of the events we are studying. Unless this is grasped we distort the past. A distorted past is useless for any scientific insights that may help us confront present problems.

It is the events of the 1970s which compel us to try to understand the 1930s. But the events of the 1930s were shaped by the events which preceded the 1930s, not by today's events. Once we ignore this, we ignore materialism and go over to the idealist school of history.

ARBITRARY

The idealist approaches history in a completely arbitrary manner. Those who lived in the past are judged as if they had experienced all that we of the present have experienced. Fixed notions of history are clung to and historical "fact" dug up to justify these abstract notions. History thus becomes a justification of the present rather than an objective and scientific understanding of how change took place then so we can learn more of how we can change the

A Critical Assessment of a Pioneer Trotskyist represents idealist history at its worst. It is the clearest expression of the break of the Workers Revolutionary Party leadership with Marxism and its embracing of idealism.

Early Communism

The American workers movement has been characterised historically not by one but by two complementary types of political activity. First there has been the bitter class struggle of masses of impoverished workers seeking union organisations. American labour history is as violent as any in the world. This bitter class struggle against powerful and ruthless monopoly capitalists produced such radical organisations as the Industrial Workers of the World. The IWW was typical, but by no means the only, expression of this radical activist class struggle tendency within the American workers movement.

The great weakness of this tendency was its hostility to theory and even in some cases to political activity of any sort. This expressed a methodological concession to the pragmatism of the American capitalist class. The hostile attitude towards politics within the revolutionary IWW paralleled that within the right-wing reformist AFL.

There was, however, another trend in American radicalism. This was *sectarianism*. Marx and Engels came into sharp conflict with the early German-American Marxist movement in America over this issue. They urged the German-Americans to abandon their aloofness from the rest of the American working class and find a road to the mass of American workers. Adherence to Marxist doctrine was not enough. The German-Americans had to find a way for that doctrine to live in the actual movement of American workers — a movement which would by no means simply follow European patterns.

Daniel DeLeon continued the tradition of these early German-Americans transforming their movement into a completely ossified sect — the Socialist Labor Party.

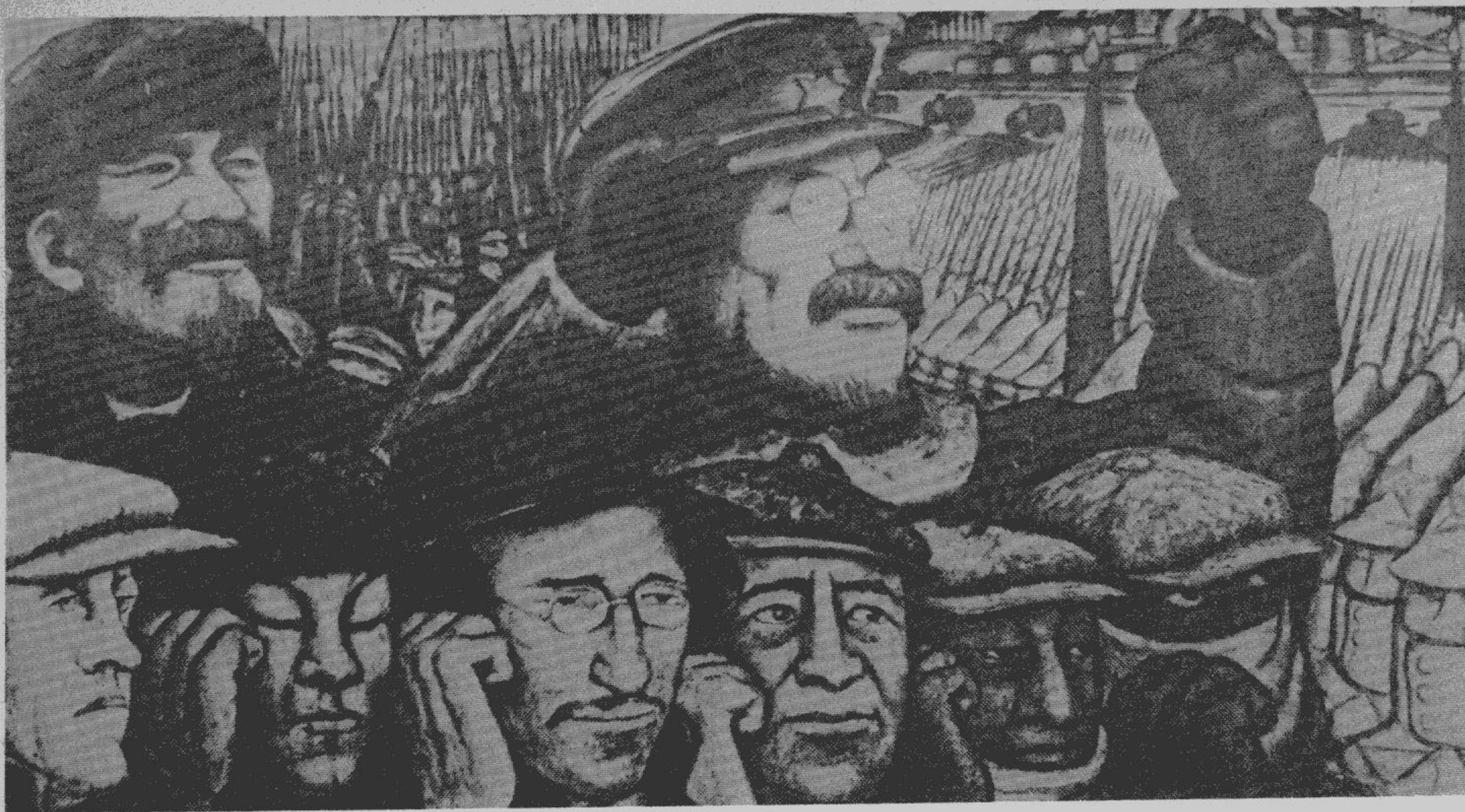
These two tendencies were complementary in that in one tendency theory was developed only in its abstract and metaphysical form separated from practice, while in the other tendency practice flourished but was never negated against previously developed theory. No organisation in the early history of the American workers movement brought theory and practice together as a unity and struggle of opposites. Theory could not develop isolated from the actual experiences in struggle of masses of workers. The struggle of masses of workers could not go beyond the bounds of American capitalism without a theoretical development.

It is of considerable importance to note that these two tendencies found an expression in the early Communist movement. James P. Cannon was very much in the thick of the struggles which broke out among these tendencies. An understanding of these divisions, the role of Cannon in them, and the role of Lenin and Trotsky, is essential to an understanding of Cannon and American Trotskyism.

First it must be noted that the divisions within the early Communist movement were not a simple and direct development of the old division between the SLP of Daniel DeLeon and the IWW. Very little came out of the old SLP into the new Communist Party. (Actually there was only a small group led by Dr. Julius Hammer and his son Armand, the present President of Occidental Petroleum.) However, the case of the IWW was very different. A large number of Wobblies and those influenced by the Wobblies joined the new CP and were to play important roles within it.

This is not an accidental development. The "theorists" of the SLP were actually extremely conservative people, distant from the American working class. It was among the fighters of the IWW, as well as of the Socialist Party, despite their poverty in theory, that a layer developed responding to the Russian Revolution.

However, another group developed which was to play a



A fresco by Mexican artist Diego Rivera, showing Lenin and Trotsky, with delegates to the Third International, reviewing the Red Army. Rivera's work is an indication of the enormous impact of the Russian Revolution on workers and intellectuals

Russian federation. These federations were made up of immigrant workers who responded to revolution in their homeland as well as to the class oppression and discrimination they faced in America. However, the federations were dominated by centrist politicians content to preach the most revolutionary doctrine in their little foreign language groups — just as long as they did not have to practise revolutionary conduct in the broad American labor movement. They were the most orthodox of men — and the most conservative.

James P. Cannon was part of the tendency within the CP which came out of the IWW and the SP and which fought for a turn to the American working class as a whole. He, together with William Z. Foster and others, fought to break the sectarian stranglehold that the foreign language federations had on the early CP. As the record clearly shows, Lenin and Trotsky intervened in the American movement politically on a number of occasions to support the political positions of the Cannon-Foster tendency against those of the foreign language group. (3)

It is this actual history that Michael Banda seeks to twist and distort to justify both his own political action as well as Gerry Healy's today. Banda quotes Cannon in this vein:

"We were convinced that it was impossible to build a movement in this country without a leadership in control more intimately acquainted with and related to the native movement of American workers." (4)

He then draws the following conclusion from Cannon's remarks:

"This theme recurs in different forms in Cannon's speeches and writings and in one example took the curiously provincial form of opposing Chicago — a 100% Midwest city — to 'cosmopolitan' New York as the center of the revolutionary party.

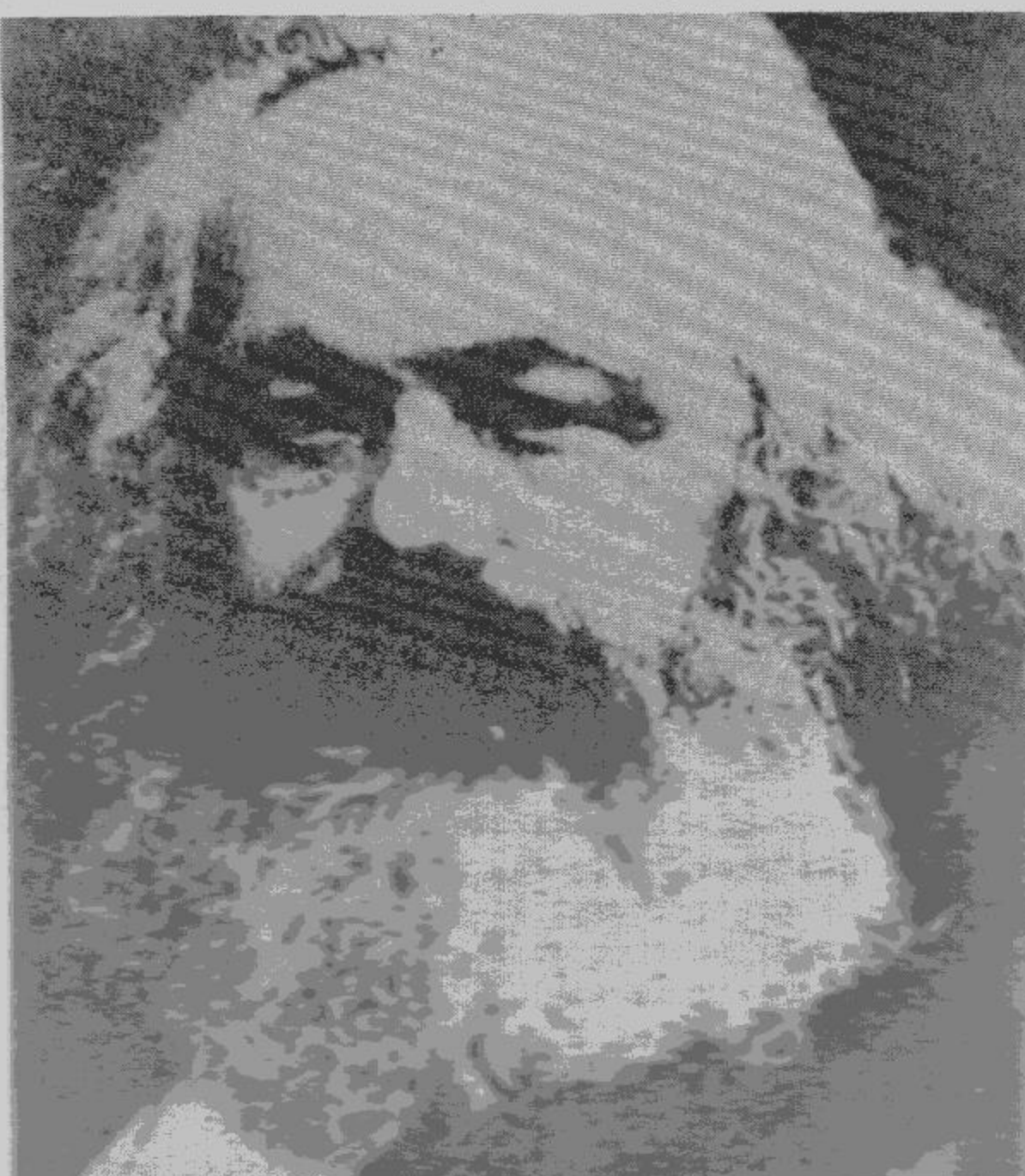
"Cannon's remarks betray an organic provincialism combined with an ingrained indifference to dialectical theory. The point at issue was not the national origins of the leaders, but the struggle for dialectical materialism as against the prevailing idealist and pragmatic outlook in America. Their native origins did not prevent the majority of the native American leadership, Foster, Browder, Lovestone, W. Dunne, Minor and others, from capitulating abjectly to Stalinism." (5)

This represents a terrible slander of Cannon and a distortion of history. Cannon was not critical of the foreign language federations because of the national origins of their leaders. It was a question of their sect-like existence and conservative politics that led him to criticize them. The absurdity of Banda's slander is made clearer when one looks at Cannon's closest political associates. These included Karl Scoglund of Swedish origin, Arne Swabeck of Danish origin, Max Schachtman and Martin Abern, both New York Jews.

DEFENDED

Why was it that Lenin and Trotsky defended Cannon against the foreign language federations? Perhaps because they felt that a grasp of the actual life and thinking of the mass of workers of a country is a necessary precondition for the building of a revolutionary movement within it. Certainly this was how Marx and Engels approached the German-Americans of their day.

When Banda discusses the issue of Chicago, he betrays



only his own ignorance of the United States of that period. Chicago was then, and is to some extent now, a city of immigrants. Its importance lies in its location at the centre of the country, which was extremely helpful in those days of poor transportation, for building a truly national movement. Furthermore, the great concentration of heavy industry in Chicago and nearby Great Lakes cities was also of importance. Then, as well as now, the strip from Milwaukee to Buffalo is the industrial heartland of America.

It does not necessarily flow from this that a revolutionary party must have its national headquarters in Chicago. The old IWW and the SP did. The new CP did not. However, it is not a mere matter of provincialism to make such a proposal. Furthermore, there can be no denying the great influence of the petty bourgeoisie on radical politics particularly in New York City. Evidence of this was most sharply seen in the struggle with the Schachtman-Burnham faction in the SWP in 1940. It is still a factor in American working class politics.

Michael Banda's criticism of Cannon's role in the early Communist Party is not a matter of a single isolated quote. It comprises the entire first two parts of his five part series. A study of this material makes it clear that these sections were written primarily to make this single polemic point: that Cannon's "original sin" lay in his efforts to root the early Communists in the American working class movement.

LABOR PARTY

Let us examine how he proceeds to develop this point in his discussion in Part Two of the series on the labor party question. Banda notes that Cannon had a tendency to be preoccupied with the American question while showing a general lack of interest in international questions within the Communist International. This, of course, was true. Cannon himself makes this self-criticism of his conduct during that period, as well as the conduct of all the American factions of that day.

Then Banda quotes Cannon in 1923:

"The American movement has no counterpart anywhere else in the world, and any attempt to meet its problem by the simple process of finding a European analogy will not succeed. The key to the American problem can only be found in a thorough examination of the peculiar American situation. Our Marxist outlook, confirmed by the history of the movement in Europe, provides us with some general principles to go by, but there is no pattern, made to order from European experience, that fits America today."

Banda then comments on this quote:

"Cannon here betrays a complete lack of understanding of the active and revolutionary side of reflection. He saw theory in the same way that a ship's captain sees navigational points of reference on a map — 'some general principles', nothing more. The 'peculiar American situation' can only be grasped by empirical improvisation. Here the concession to American pragmatism is barely concealed and spontaneity takes over. This also explains the failure of Cannon and the early CP leaders fully to grasp the significance of Lenin and Trotsky's demand for a labor party. This, after all, was not a 'peculiar' American institution but a 'European analogy'." (7)

Once again we see Banda's tendency to direct correct criticisms of Cannon's theoretical weaknesses in order to make very incorrect points. Cannon was not a developed Marxist in 1923. He did tend to see Marxism in a very fixed way which was to be combined with his own empirical improvisations. Nevertheless, he was an American revolutionist in the process of learning, of developing, as part of an international movement. And 1923 was a relatively early date in this development.

PRINCIPLES

What Cannon says about principles is, however, incorrect. Principles are expressed through practice and are developed precisely in a continuous conflict with new experiences in practice. There is, therefore, rich content in the European experience for American revolutionists then as well as now. In fact, principles can only be expressed in this concrete form.

Nonetheless Cannon is 100% correct when he said: "There is no pattern, made to order from European experience, that fits America today". That is as true today as it was when it was written in 1923.

These points may be made clearer if we turn to the example Banda refers to: the labor party question. No one in the earliest days of the American CP favored a labor party slogan. After all, the IWW had opposed all political action while both the right and the left wings of the Socialist Party had opposed actual labor parties as so much competition. Engels' writings on the question to the early

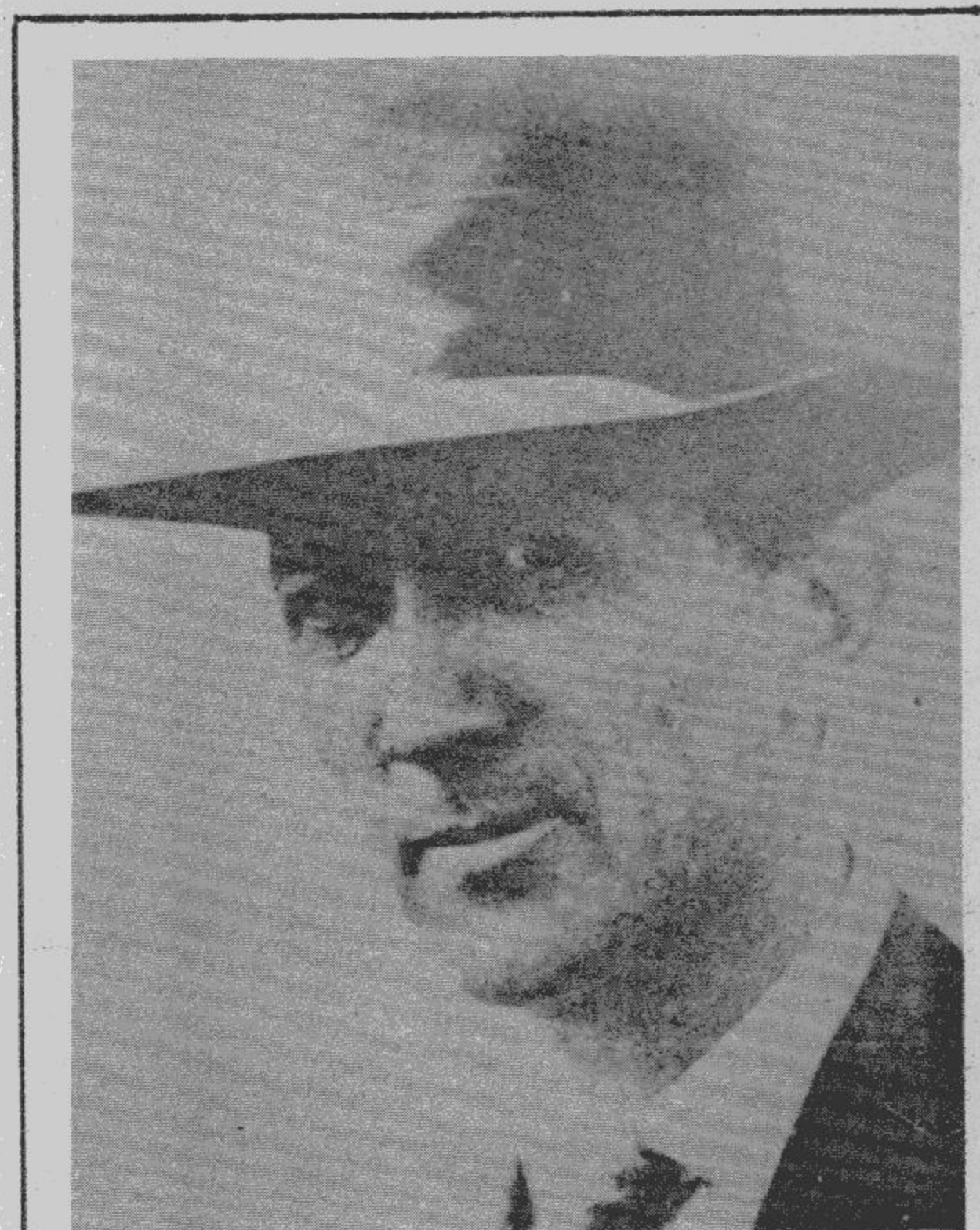
Cannon's generation. (8)

Thus, the impetus for the labor party demand came from Lenin and Trotsky. As Cannon explains in *The First Ten Years of American Communism*, the idea first came to the American Communists because of Lenin's position concerning the need to support the reformist labor party in England. (9) The labor party slogan was then taken up by the Cannon-Foster group as a subordinate part of their campaign against the sectarian foreign language faction which was insisting on the underground party. The Cannon-Foster position was then endorsed by the Comintern in 1922.

Between 1922 and 1924, a genuine labor party movement developed in the United States led by important elements from the trade unions. The trade union movement then was experiencing the effects of economic conditions similar to those we face today. It was those conditions which prepared the way for the Great Depression. The Communist Party, supported by the Comintern, intervened vigorously in this development.

However, this situation was transformed into a fiasco because of the manoeuvrings of John Pepper, a Hungarian adventurer who had connections with Zinoviev. By 1924, the labor party movement was split, with the CP controlling an empty form with very few independent trade unionists in it, while Pepper had swung the CP behind the bourgeois-liberal LaFollette Progressive Party campaign. Cannon and Foster, supported in Moscow by Trotsky, opposed this campaign and the whole Pepper regime. Pepper had the support of Lovestone, the inheritor of the old right wing around the foreign language federations.

By 1925, the situation in the Comintern had begun to change. The Comintern was beginning to function as a factional instrument in the various national parties in support of the leading faction within the Russian party. Even though by this time the Cannon-Foster forces had a clear majority within the American party, the Comintern imposed a leadership from the minority led by the Ruthenberg-Lovestone forces. In the process of carrying out this change in leadership, the labor party question was transformed into a factional issue.



William Z. Foster

The Cannon-Foster bloc, noting the waning of the labor party movement in the unions and the debacle over the Progressive Party, proposed dropping the slogan altogether. Cannon later felt that there was a difference in approach on this issue between himself and Foster. He believed that Foster simply wanted to eliminate all political questions in the unions, while for him it was a tactical matter based on the ebb in the actual labor party movement. (10)

However, regardless of this fact, it is now clear to us that Cannon took a wrong position on this question. While correctly favoring the abandonment of the rump labor party formation and any other artificial organizational approaches, he should have insisted on a continuing propaganda campaign for the labor party. This was indeed a reflection of the pragmatic approach.

However, the Lovestone-Ruthenberg forces took the labor party issue up and were supported by the Comintern as a factional issue against the Cannon-Foster group. For them it was a cover for their involvement in the LaFollette debacle and part of a right turn, a reflection in America of what would emerge as a Stalin-Bukharin bloc later within the USSR.

If we look at this actual history, we can grasp better the relationship between Cannon, Marxism and the international movement. First the impulse for a labor party policy did come from abroad — as did the impulse for an approach to the Blacks and other questions vital to building a revolutionary movement in America. The Marxists in Europe understood the peculiarities of the American situation better than the Americans of that day.

But it was the peculiarities the Comintern grasped. It fought throughout this period against those who sought to formally and by analogy transpose into America Russian experiences like soviets and the like. Lenin and Trotsky insisted on a struggle to grasp the peculiar development of the working class in each specific country. There is no short cut to this process. Nothing can be built in one country by adaptation to forms developed in another country. This is as true of the labor party question as any other. A labor party in America will not develop as it did in England. It will develop differently.

Next, it is not accidental that one faction — the Cannon-Foster faction — learned from the Comintern on this question while the other faction — the foreign language group — opposed the labor party while distinguishing themselves as the greatest adapters of European analogies. Marxism is after all the scientific expression of the interests of the working class. Those rooted in the working class, turned into it, represent the revolutionary material out of which Marxism can develop. There is no guarantee that this development will take place. But Marxism never, never, never develops among the sectarians, the formalists, the circle builders, the centrist radical phrasemongers.

For Banda to state that, after all, members of the Cannon-Foster "Americanizing" group became Stalinists only proves that a turn into the working class is insufficient

revolutionist. However, the fact that Trotskyism emerged from the "Americanizers" and not from the foreign language sects is not an accidental phenomenon but one of the greatest significance to us today. After all, American Trotskyism was the only serious Trotskyist movement to develop in the 1930s. As we assess its weaknesses, let us also seek to understand why it existed at all.

The extremity of Banda's factionalism over this labor party question is expressed in what he says on the International Labor Defense:

"Although the influence of the ILD campaign on Sacco and Vanzetti was considerable, its political impact was negligible, because it never raised at any time Lenin's suggestion of creating a political alternative to the two-party system — a labor party based on the unions." (11)

Banda here confuses the role of a defence committee and that of a revolutionary party. The Communist Party did fight for a labor party during various periods in the 1920s and Cannon was very much a part of that fight. But a labor defence is broader than a party. It must, as Cannon insisted in that period, base itself on the working class but at the same time be open to all political tendencies, unions etc. in the working class. This, we might add, is exactly the way the Workers League ran the Farinas defence which also never advocated a labor party. (12) Farinas, of course, spoke for the party on the labor party and many other issues.

Now we turn to the most absurd slander of all — Banda's assessment of why it was James P. Cannon broke with the Stalinists to join Trotskyism in the first place. Here Banda spits upon the very origins of our movement. Here is what Banda states:

"It is however a debatable point whether Cannon realized the real significance of Trotsky's critique. He never subsequently explained what 'doubts' were resolved by the 'criticism'. It is more probable that Cannon, representing a class tendency in the party, could not reach a compromise with Foster and Lovestone, who were supported by Stalin, and that this drove him empirically to seek the help of Trotsky." (13)

There is nothing debatable at all here. The facts speak differently. Lovestone and Foster were in two opposing tendencies at the time. The Foster tendency was aligned with the Cannon tendency. At the very Comintern meeting in 1928 when Cannon was won over to Trotskyism, there were plenty of signs of a shift in Kremlin policy in favour of Cannon and Foster. There was no indication of any Kremlin action directed against Cannon. This is why Cannon's adherence to Trotskyism came as such a shock to the Kremlin and even his allies within the CP.

To talk about seeking "the help of Trotsky" is absurd on the face of it. Not only did Cannon not have any contact with Trotsky in that period, as Trotsky was isolated in Alma Ata, but even the slightest connection with Trotsky meant suicide politically for anyone in the Comintern in those days. The result of Cannon's support to Trotsky was to isolate him more than he had ever been in his political life to that day. He was to suffer the most fantastic political and personal tribulations because of this action and he could not help but know that at the time.

Why could not a man who chose Lenin and Trotsky and the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 choose Trotsky in 1928? Was there no connection between Trotsky's theories and the actual needs of American workers which Cannon could see?

We now get to the heart of the Banda school of historical idealism. James P. Cannon is seen as a fixed entity — an American pragmatist hostile to Marxism. This fixed characteristic, no doubt gotten in birth, remained with him to his death when he abandoned Marxism. Here, change, contradiction and actual development is denied. Marxist theory itself is seen as an esoteric philosophical exercise.

IDEALIST

This position of Banda's represents a real turn to idealist philosophy, to a form of neo-Hegelianism. This can be seen from the following:

"The separation of theory and practice — to be precise, the refusal to posit practice on theory and extract knowledge from this conflict — has been the hallmark of the American radical movement. . . . Cannon, however, created Lenin in his own image. In his later writings he saw Lenin's most enduring conquest as the disciplined combat vanguard party, but neglected Lenin's truly historic contribution to the Marxist theory of cognition, of which the Bolshevik Party was an integral and vital part". (14)

This raises immediately a question of critical importance. Is the disciplined combat vanguard party Lenin's most enduring conquest or is it simply a part and expression of his "truly historic contribution to the Marxist theory of cognition"? Does the study of method exist for the purpose of better constructing the revolutionary party or do we construct the revolutionary party in order to refine our philosophical method? Banda, in subordinating the revolutionary party to the development of philosophy, breaks completely with materialism and embraces idealism. We may note that modern British philosophy has been marked by a suffocating return to idealism.

Holding this position, Banda never explains exactly how one learns to posit living practice on theory, to develop a mastery of the Marxist method. Is it through some esoteric mental gymnastics removed from the construction of the party in the working class? Or is it precisely in the actual practice of the party.

There is another question raised by this statement of Banda's. The "truly historic contribution to the Marxist theory of cognition" was of course made by Marx and not by Lenin. It was Marx who, together with Engels, made one of the world's greatest intellectual discoveries when he rooted Hegel's dialectics in the material world. Marx accomplished this task not as a philosophical exercise but through the development of the Marxist method in his masterful *Capital* and in his practice in founding the First International.

Lenin made important contributions to the Marxist theory of cognition, but primarily as a defender of Marxist materialism. Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, a book which Banda should definitely study, represents a critically important defence of materialism against a new school of bourgeois idealist thought. Together with Plekanov's writings, it is indispensable reading for revolutionaries. His *Philosophical Notebooks*, though by no means a finished work, is extremely useful as a materialist guide to Hegel. But neither book represents any real development beyond the contributions of Marx and Hegel on philosophical matters.



May 1934: scenes from the bitter fighting during the Minneapolis Teamsters' strike for union recognition. Two pickets were killed.

represented a profound development beyond Marx in a revolutionary period which permitted such a development. This is expressed in such writings as *What Is To Be Done?*, *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*, *State and Revolution* and *Imperialism*. All this combined with the continuous, and often disheartening, work of gathering and training cadres, prepared the way for the Russian Revolution. This Revolution was the triumphal test of Marxism in practice and a great leap for all mankind which is still shaping history.

All this can, of course, be viewed as a contribution to the theory of cognition once we realize that after Marx scientific cognition cannot be separated from practice. But to view it this way is to strip cognition of the richness and concreteness of what is cognized, that is to separate out the theory of knowledge from knowledge itself. This means really a return to pre-Marxian metaphysics which sees a separate field for "philosophy" isolated from the whole process of scientific knowledge and human practice.

Early Trotskyism

Mike Banda's assessment of the American Trotskyist movement in the days when Trotsky was alive is as one-sided as his assessment of the early Communist movement. He begins with his conclusions — the role Cannon played in his last years. History for Banda is nothing more than the search of past evidence which shows the roots of later development. But real history is not a matter of the continuous development of a tendency from birth to full flowering. In between there is contradictory movement, other tendencies and occasionally the real hope of a changed and powerful movement.

In seeking to understand American Trotskyism in the 1930s, we must look for more than the roots of the revisionism of the 1960s. We must seek to understand why this movement developed the strength that it did in the 1930s, why it was the only national section to build a serious apparatus and press consistently published, a trained cadre, a sizeable proletarian membership, and a record of leading mass struggles of the working class. We must also ask ourselves why was it that the resistance to Pabloism internationally came from the Cannon leadership and why this resistance was *decisive* in establishing the International Committee itself?

What Banda refuses to grasp is the *change* which took place in Cannon in his turn to Trotsky in 1928. Cannon did turn first and foremost to international questions in this period. Every issue of the *Militant* was devoted to China, to Germany, to all the issues of the international Communist movement. This represented a change for Cannon, a development quite unknown in the circles of the American and IWW movements that he had originated from.

Cannon himself noted this change in his *History Of American Trotskyism*:

"I think one of the most important lessons that the Fourth International taught us is that in the modern epoch you cannot build a revolutionary political party solely on a national basis. You must begin with an international program, and on that basis you build national sections". (15)

Cannon took a correct *act* in siding with Trotsky in 1928. Few others internationally took such a decision. His past history prepared him for that act in the sense of his commitment to the working class. But in many other ways it did not prepare him at all. He had much to learn in those early days. It is amazing that he developed as far as he did.

We must also realize that Cannon's party was at least partly like the other parties in the Fourth International in that period. It was made up primarily of middle class radical elements who were critics of Stalinism. They were by and large not revolutionary material. They were centrists by nature, conservative by inclination; nevertheless this was an indispensable stage in the development of a revolutionary movement in America. That Cannon survived what he called "the dog days" is itself to his credit. Few revolutionaries did.

The early Trotskyist movement was built on principles. It was educated in a continuous struggle over international issues. It learned greatly from Trotsky. At the same time, Cannon brought important qualities to the Trotskyist movement. These were qualities no other national section



Trotsky and Natalia December 1932.

Cannon brought with him into the Trotskyist movement decades of experience in mass work in the American working class. He won at the beginning the support of a small but critically important grouping of working class revolutionaries, largely in Minneapolis. In addition he had serious training and experience as a *party builder* in the Communist Party under the tutelage of the Comintern in its best days. He was in 1928 no simple Wobbly or Debsian socialist.

It would explain nothing to attribute to Trotsky's intervention everything that was healthy in the American movement and to Cannon's contribution only a negative pragmatism. After all Trotsky paid far greater attention to the German party and the French party but nothing ever emerged in the way of leadership or cadre in either country. The American party was built through a relationship between a serious proletarian leadership around Cannon, with some history behind it, and Trotsky. This leadership emerged from that section of the old Communist movement closest to the working class which, at the same time, was determined to build a *Leninist* party.

Such a leadership could not develop out of adaptations to European experiences. A leadership of workers can never be imported into a country. This is why all the cries of the bourgeoisie about the export of revolution are so phony. A leadership must develop out of the conditions within a particular country through a common struggle with revolutionaries organised on an international scale. Such a leadership must carry with it all the difficulties and weaknesses, as well as the strengths of its own working class. If this were not the case, it then would be completely separated from and thus out of touch with that working class. Such a leadership develops into a *Marxist* leadership through a continuous internal strygle against these tendencies which naturally and spontaneously develop in and around the party. In America, that requires a struggle against pragmatism. It does not mean finding a leadership which, through some mystical process, is purified ahead of time.

Actually this entire series was written by Banda as a rationalization for the Workers Revolutionary Party's (i.e. Gerry Healy) tactics which have had such a devastating impact on the Workers League. The leadership of the Workers League was created in a very different period than Cannon's. It never had the opportunity to participate in mass working class struggles. Nevertheless, it was an indigenous leadership, which had been formed over 20 years and which had a principled history and embodied a great deal of experience.

This leadership built up a sizable movement, with a regular press, a cadre of some training, and the beginnings of a serious penetration of the American working class. This was not simply the accomplishment of myself and leading comrades. However, it was not done simply by the British alone. There is not another section like it in the International Committee today. Only in the United States did such a party develop outside of England.

Healy and Banda intervened in the Workers League to change this leadership, to remove it in a completely capricious manner. They set up a substitute leadership of adaptors of simple followers of the British. They displayed none of the patience in the development of a leadership which characterized Trotsky's interventions in the movement in the U.S. and in other countries. *They had abandoned in practice Marxism for idealism.* The Banda series is a dishonest attempt to justify such a disastrous policy.

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