

PERSPECTIVES

A reckless gamble disrupts French left

By Bogdan Denitch

Now that the French left has snatched defeat from the jaws of victory, it is clear that it did not take two to start its internal fight. Yet we can be grateful to Marchais and the French CP for having made it clear that if the French left stays out of power for the next decade, the narrow organizational interests and the sectarian politics of French Communism are mainly to blame.

A reckless gamble with the prospect of a major left-wing breakthrough was undertaken during the last year by the French Communists, a gamble all the more reckless because it cannot be blamed on orders from Moscow or the needs of the Soviet state. The French communists have won their independence and asserted it often and harshly enough for observers to be able to assign the responsibility for this fallback to the French party itself, to its internal needs and to the parochial vision of socialism and its prospects that dominate it.

Two issues were overwhelmingly important. The French CP still has a narrow, overcentralist vision of socialist strategy that seems superbly designed to frighten hesitant middle class voters back into the center-right fold. They have learned nothing and forgotten nothing. This is particularly painful in the framework of French politics where their major partner, the French Socialist party, was willing to propose a program far to the left of all other social democratic parties. The PSF's renaissance offers the possibility of shifting the balance within the Socialist International to the left. Victory in coalition would have had an enormous positive effect on the prospects of the left throughout the continent. A decisive victory for the left in France would have helped the Italian Communists enormously and accelerated the possibilities of unification in the Spanish left. A victory with a stable left coalition would also have settled the argument about the need and feasibility of a socialist/communist coalition and, thus, integrated the development of Eurocommunism into the mainstream of working class politics by making a European socialism possible. For that, self-restraint on the part of the CP was required. But it was absent.

Competition for working class support.

The second issue, of course, affected the relation of forces between the two working class parties. In order to maintain its crumbling organizational hegemony on the left, the CP not only prevented a left coalition victory but concentrated most of its effective fire on its socialist partners. It is a near miracle that the French socialist movement was led by a politician as stable as Mitterand who throughout this Donnybrook firmly kept restating his commitment to a common program of the left and an electoral alliance with the Communists. The Socialist party resisted its two temptations: to enter into a counteroffensive against the CP and exacerbate the divisions on the left by responding in the tone the CP used throughout the debate, or to be pushed into a destructive and sterile left-center strategy.

Given the major inducements dangled before the SP, both domestically and internationally, to settle for a left-center strategy, and given the heterogeneous nature of the Socialist party, where a substantive section of the rank-and-file and socialist voters would probably prefer

such a strategy, it took a major commitment to a common program on the part of the SP leadership to resist being pushed in that direction. We must be clear on this. The CP willingly undertook this risk—the risk of breaking up the coalition and forcing the socialists into a left-center strategy—in order to win a few percentage points in the election, away from other left parties, and to retain its organizational stability.

Lesson to be drawn.

It is not too early to draw some lessons from the French events. Some are relevant to the massive left in Europe, and some to American socialists. The first general strategic question lies in the definition of the clientele, status groups and voters that have to be won over to create a left majority. Clearly, those groups lie to the right of the organized parties of the left. It is not by coalescing with the microscopic ultra-left groups that the left majority can be constructed. On the contrary, a majority can only be created by winning over masses that have not yet committed themselves to socialism or that have been voting for the centrist parties. This lesson, already painfully learned by the Italian and Spanish communists, has clearly eluded the French. The absence of a large left majority cannot be attributed to the moderation of the common program. Uncertainties in the minds of the voters focus on the dramatic breakthroughs that are proposed by that program, on the massive increase of minimum wages, the nationalization of the commanding heights of the economy, and the obvious determination of the left coalition to go beyond welfare state tinkering with the social order.

To leap into such a risk-laden and uncertain course, the voters not already committed to the left needed to be convinced of several things, probably the most important of which is that the left is capable of governing. Therefore, the inquisitorial tone of the CP in dealing with its partners, while reassuring to party cadres, must have been frightening to potential left voters.

If the CP was willing to risk a defeat in order to push its partners beyond what they were willing to do, what were the prospects of a left government? In a situation where the president could call an election any time the polls indicated a weakening of the left, and where major stresses would be created by the flight of capital and a strike of the capitalist class, disunity on the left seemed to guarantee disaster. This explains the sharp drop in popular support for the unified left, just as the unity of the left explained the previous increase of support.

There is a distinction between a protest vote and an affirmative vote. The voters were not asked to protest against the obvious injustices of the existing social order, but to give a mandate to change. And with a blank check to a left that remained disunited until the eve of the vote. That was asking a great deal.

It is not fruitful to go into the substance of the quarrel because even if the CP were right, it is clear that it could not be right alone. The inevitability of coalition politics made the party apparat rebel against the possibility of beginning the social transformation of France with itself as a junior partner. But no observers, left, right or center, had even hinted that the French electorate would support a united left with the CP as a senior partner. France is not Italy. The French communists have not earned the trust that the Ital-

ian party has. Therefore, in its emergence from political isolation and the ghetto into which the Cold War placed it, it was essential that the coalition be dominated by the Socialists. And it was a piece of major good fortune that France had a Socialist party that understood the indispensability of a coalition and was willing to shed its Cold War roots to go into such a coalition. This was not easy. It involved major arguments with other mass socialist parties and, therefore, a victory of the left in France would have also been a victory for the left-wings within the Socialist International.

If the first lesson is that the parties must address themselves to their right if they are to win substantial majorities, the second lesson probably is that nationalization is not the most attractive part of the appeal of the Left. It is an instrument and not an end, and the masses of new left voters tend to be far less taken with the dogma of rigid centralized planning than are the old-timers in both the Socialist and Communist parties. When the Communists contemptuously stated that all that the common program would do was to create in France a society resembling that of Sweden, they missed the point entirely. That would be a major advance in France and one hailed by groups currently uninvolved in left politics. An egalitarian France, more committed to social justice, more modern, was not something to be sneered at except by ideologues.

But the common program went far beyond that proposed by the Swedish social democrats.

The strategy of a left government in Europe can either be European or autarchic. For the flight of capital to be made more difficult and for the French economy to avoid being blockaded, the European arena provides a framework for coalitions in which a social democratic majority can be used to absorb the shock of transition. That majority that exists within the common market obviously would find it easier to relate to a government, the dominant force of which was the French SP. The alternative, an autarchic France, would have probably created stresses and cleavages in which a major left-right clash would create a near civil war situation. My argument, and it is the same argument that is used by the Italian and Spanish communists, is that such a cleavage at this stage in Europe works for the right, not for the left. Europe is on the eve of a swing to the left, but not in revolutionary ferment. That is not a matter of choice; it's a matter of analysis. A radical left or revolutionary program in that context means isolation and not victory. Left versus right politics within the workers' movement obviously hinged on what are the alternatives as perceived by the mass base of the left. In a context where revolutionary transformations are on the agenda, a social democratic line is a betrayal of the revolution. But in a context where wide-scale structural reforms are on the agenda, to play with revolutionary strategy dooms a left party to isolation and may well make such struc-

tural changes impossible by destroying the broad base for a left victory.

That part of the lesson is one that has a reference to the American left, particularly in how it relates to the events in Europe. It is ironic that much of the left in the U.S.—weak, divided and sectarian as it is—instinctively appears to back the more radical currents within the European left. In some cases the focus is on the extra-parliamentary micro-groupings in Italy and Spain that spend the bulk of their time polemicizing against the CPs where they are right. They attack the communists when they begin to present themselves as serious, political alternatives to the existing social order. This ultra-left, at least in my vision, can have two possible roles. One is that of acting as ginger groups, helping keep the mass left honest; the other is to attempt to block the breakout of isolation required to build majorities. It is impossible for a revolutionary left, at this stage, to obtain a majority even within the working class, let alone within society. Therefore, support for the ultra-left is support of the existing status quo. Unless, of course, one seriously proposes a revolutionary strategy based on a minority within industrial politics of Europe. How such a strategy could lead to a democratic social order and a pluralist socialism escapes me.

Parts of the American left that do not support the ultras seem to support the more sectarian groups within the Eurocommunist milieu. For example, the French versus the Italian CP. It would seem appropriate that the support, if it is to be based on more than an antipathy towards social democracy and even to left socialist parties, should also state its affirmative program. IN THESE TIMES has been at least ambivalent on this matter. What is the real meaning of siding with the CP? Are we saying by this that we think that there is no prospect of a left majority? That there should not be such a majority because it would not go far enough? What is an alternative strategy?

This, in turn, ties to one's view of American socialist politics. Is it the purity of faith that is our problem, or the absence of a mass base? Does a mass base for socialism exist to the left of the existing socialist organizations—miniscule as they are—or is the problem of building a socialist movement one of winning the millions of American working class, radical and progressive-minded voters to even the most moderate socialist alternative?

I believe it is the latter, and it is therefore that coalition politics are imposed on the socialist left in America, not as a matter of choice but as a question of the circumstances within which we live, where the majority without which a mass left is inconceivable, today is to be found voting for the Democrats. But that is a different argument and one that may be well worth pursuing at greater length. ■

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RAPID TRANSIT

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BOOKS



POLITICS

A searchingly self-critical account of the American Communist experience

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN AMERICAN COMMUNIST: A Personal View of a Political Life, 1925-1975

By Peggy Dennis
Lawrence Hill & Co.
Creative Arts Book Co., \$5.95

Since 1958, when John Gates' autobiography appeared, there have been almost a dozen biographies or autobiographies of leading American Communists. With one or two exceptions, they have been thin stuff, revealing little of the motives or emotions of party leaders, and less about the nature of the party itself. Now, however, Peggy Dennis has written in an *Autobiography of an American Communist* a painfully honest and searchingly self-critical account of her own life and of the history and character of the American Communist party.

The widow of Eugene Dennis, a top ranking national leader of the Communist party from 1938 until his death in 1961, Peggy Dennis was in the unique position of being able to observe first hand the inner workings of the top echelons of the party without being directly responsible for party decisions. As Dennis' wife, she was and remains fiercely loyal to him, but as an early feminist, she was rankled by many things in her relationships both with him and with other party leaders. In writing her autobiography, this critical distance, combined with a principled integrity, have served her well.

Early experiences.

Peggy Dennis grew up in an immigrant radical community in Los Angeles in the 'teens and early '20s. Her parents were immigrants, her mother a revolutionary who had fled czarist Russia rather than accept exile to Siberia, her father also a socialist. From her earliest years, the Russian revolutionary movement, and then the Russian Revolution, were central to her life.

She joined the Young Communist League at 13 and the party at 16, in 1925. Three years later, at a Marxist summer school in Oregon, she met Frank Waldron, later to be known as Eugene Dennis. They fell in love and remained together for the next 33 years, except for stretches of time when Gene was on Comintern assignment in South Africa or the Far East.

In 1938, while the Dennises were living in Moscow where



Gene and Peggy Dennis

Gene was the American party's representative to the International, the Russians "suggested" that he be installed as a buffer between William Z. Foster and Earl Browder, the party's two most prominent leaders. The Dennises moved to New York, where Peggy stayed until Gene's death in 1961. She then moved back to the West Coast and remained an active party member until after the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. In 1976, she finally resigned from the party.

From the time she was a schoolgirl, Dennis lived in two worlds. At Young Communist meetings she made eloquent speeches "denouncing the Rockefeller and Morgan warmakers and urging support of the new children's revolutionary movement." But in high school, Peggy and her sister Mini "participated in statewide oratorical contests and Shakespearean festivals," and won the leads in their respective senior plays.

Peggy was the editor of her school paper. Both sisters "went steady with popular athletes," and belonged to "in-groups noted for being intellectual, service-minded, trend setting." It was perhaps strange, Dennis writes, "that we did not suffer split personality symptoms as we grew up keeping our political and school lives in separate compartments."

The two worlds of Communist politics.

In a different form, this split would plague Peggy, Gene, and the entire Communist party

throughout its existence. As Dennis puts it, the problem for the party was how to Americanize Communism. At the summer school where she met Gene, he told the students that their movement "had to be rooted in the American experience, molded by the American culture." Yet, a few days later, when the camp was threatened with attack by hostile local people, a meeting was held to decide how to respond. "No Bolshevik group in Czarist Russia debated the issue of reformism versus adventurism more seriously than we," Dennis writes.

This identification with the Russian experience was only natural in the early '20s, when the Russian party's achievement still had widespread support and admiration among socialists of all varieties, as well as among trade unionists and many liberals. But for American Communists, the identification was total. Thus, when Peggy arrived in Moscow in 1931 to join Gene (who had been assigned to the Comintern several months earlier), she felt that "six thousand miles from home, I was Home." And in 1937, when she returned to Moscow to accompany Gene (who now was the American party's representative there) she remembers her "old awareness that I was Home; that unlike anywhere else in the world, here was the embodiment of all we were working for."

Since for Dennis, as for all Communists, the Soviet Union embodied all the virtues of socialism—was the model for social-

ism—Americanizing Communism became an insoluble dilemma, one that has still not been solved by the party, and that Dennis herself illustrates but does not seem to understand. Her problem is compounded by her continuing loyalty to Gene, which leads her not only greatly to exaggerate his political sagacity, but also to imply that if only the Communists had accepted his guidance they would now have a successful mass working class party.

Loyalty imposes limitations.

Peggy's personal loyalty to Gene, admirable as it may be, prevents her from following her own revelations and observations to their logical, even obvious, conclusions. For example, she views Gene's elevation to the top ranks of party leadership as a just reward for his service and accomplishments, but she does not examine what it meant for the party to have its leadership chosen in Moscow by leaders of the Communist International, rather than by the party membership in a democratic manner. Not only could party leadership be chosen in Moscow, but no party leader could survive in office if he or she offended the Russians.

This made it impossible for American Communists to develop a conception of socialism, the revolutionary process or of party organization that differed from Russian experience or Soviet national needs. Failure to support Soviet policy or principles could never lead to changes in the American party, but only to the isolation of the innovator or dissenter.

Dennis condemns the American party's subservience to the Soviets, but because the book is also a defense of Gene, she is blind to his and the party's fundamental inability to bridge the gap between their increasingly private visions of socialism and a popular American politics. She is sharply critical of Stalin's view that the "class enemy" had penetrated "the whole fabric" of Soviet society, that it had "unlimited reserves in the population," and that the Soviet party was surrounded by a popular "sea of hostility." But she fails to see that Stalin's "lack of faith in the at-

tracting powers of socialism," as she calls it, was shared by American Communists, who for good reason had an equal lack of faith in the ability or willingness of the American people to accept the party's concept of socialism.

The idea that the American people were not ready for socialism grew out of the party's disastrous attempts during the "Third Period" (1929-1934) to popularize the idea of a Soviet America, but it was also consistent with Stalin's pronouncements on the untrustworthiness of the general population. When the Popular Front period began after 1934, therefore, the Communists relegated their discussions and thoughts of socialism more and more to their own private world, while their public activity was limited more and more narrowly to militant activity on immediate issues. Tactics and organizational measures were increasingly substituted for the public articulation and development of socialist concepts of democracy.

This is reflected in Peggy's frequent and lengthy quotations of Gene's windy speeches and articles. His dissertations and exhortations are instructive only in the emptiness and banality of Communist politics. But the reader is nevertheless treated to many lectures that read like the incantations of a medieval alchemist seeking just the right combination of opportunism and sectarianism in order to produce gold. In politics, as in chemistry, however, the noble cannot be created by combining baser ingredients. In presenting just such an attempt as an activity worthy of a top leader of a party aspiring to the leadership of the working class, Dennis demonstrates that she has not fully transcended the framework of thought in which she was enmeshed for so long.

This major flaw aside, *The Autobiography of an American Communist* is a book filled with fascinating and sometimes painful revelations and insights into the major political experience of American leftists in the 40 years from 1920 to 1960. The book is an outstanding accomplishment.

—James Weinstein

How the U.S. wrought world monetary chaos

THE ORIGINS OF INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC DISORDER: A Study of United States International Monetary Policy from World War II to the Present

By Fred L. Block
University of California Press, \$14

Prof. Fred L. Block, of the University of Pennsylvania, is a sociologist who does not force his data to conform to the initial

shape of his model, an economist who writes clearly enough to allow his assumptions to be noted and his analysis to be weighed, and a historian who has managed to integrate in a balanced way the specific causal weight of individuals and institutions.

Block's purpose in *The Origins of International Economic Disorder* is to illuminate the obstacles to the contemporary efforts at international monetary reform