

Through Liberty to Socialism

JOSEPH FREEMAN

EVEN before the convention opened, you felt something big was going to happen. The very decorations in the Manhattan Opera House for the Ninth National Convention of the Communist Party conveyed confidence.

Across the galleries, flaming red streamers with white letters carried slogans of faith in victory: The unity of labor can crush fascism and prevent war! For a free, happy and prosperous America! Keep America out of war by keeping war out of the world! High in the rear of the auditorium an immense canvas showed the Spirit of '76—drummer, fifer, standard bearer—carrying red and American flags intertwined. Out of these emerged the faces of Washington, Jefferson, John Brown, Lincoln, Frederick Douglass; beneath them the slogan: Communism is twentieth-century Americanism.

Delegates took their seats quietly at the round tables. Not a single banker, industrialist, corporation lawyer, Wall Street speculator among them. These were workers, farmers and professionals, like the vast majority of the American people. Later the credentials committee brought in some illuminating figures. For the first time in its history, the Communist Party was holding a convention with representation from all forty-eight states of the Union. There were 701 regular and fraternal delegates, twice the number at the 1932 convention. The Communist Party is young: 65 percent of the delegates are under thirty-five years of age. It is full of new blood: 62 percent of the delegates have been in the Party less than five years. It is a party of workers: 88 percent of the delegates are of proletarian, 12 percent of middle-class origin. It has won over men and women from other parties: 21 percent of the delegates were formerly in the Socialist Party, nine percent in the Democratic Party, seven percent in the I.W.W., five percent in the Republican Party.

Other figures were equally striking: 70 percent of the delegates are native-born, 30 percent foreign-born Americans; eleven percent women, fifteen percent Negroes, 67 percent from basic industries like steel, metal, automobiles, textiles, railways and shipping; 23 percent from the building trades, needle, shoe, food, white-collar and professional groups. The delegates are trade union members, 223 of them from A.F. of L. unions, 85 trade union officials.

The hall rocked with applause and cheers when William Z. Foster, the Party's chairman, opened the convention. It rocked again when Earl Browder, the Party's general secretary, closed it. And in between, for four days and four nights, when speakers took and left the platform, boundless en-

thusiasm shook the auditorium. The delegates were not reacting to oratory. There were no rhetorical tricks, no inflated phrases such as boomed through the microphones at Cleveland and Philadelphia. Each speaker said his say with the precision of a scientist. And it was these carefully planned analyses which evoked profound emotion sustained at the highest pitch and thought working at its hardest.

You could see why from the very first speech. Foster stated the issue squarely, unmistakably. The old order, he said, has the seal of death upon its forehead but is not willing to die. We meet under the shadow of menacing fascism and war. The program of the Communist Party offers the only way out. We do not stand aside from the daily struggles and problems of the millions of people until the majority has been won for socialism. We take our stand shoulder to shoulder with the masses of the people and in the front line of all their struggles. Our program is one of immediate unity of these masses in the daily fight for better living conditions, maintenance and extension of their democratic rights, and for peace.

This was Wednesday morning. That afternoon, Earl Browder made his keynote address. For two and a half hours a spell-bound convention heard him develop the position of the Communist Party in this "situation of deepening crisis of the capitalist world," and in this year's elections, "the most fateful election struggle that our country has witnessed since the Civil War."

ANALYZING the issues and parties in the 1936 elections, Browder stressed the "two chief and possible developments." One stems from the most reactionary circles of finance capital, Wall Street; its direction is toward fascism and war. He summarized the fundamental aims of this camp in five points:

(1) Restore capitalist profits by cutting wages, raising prices, checking the growth of trade unions, subverting them and eventually wiping them out; squeeze out the poor farmers from agriculture, transforming them into propertyless workers. (2) Wipe out social and labor legislation, balance the budget by eliminating unemployment relief, cutting the taxes of the rich and throwing the tax burden onto the poor by means of sales taxes. (3) Remove all remains of popular influence upon the government by vesting all final power in the hands of an irresponsible judiciary—the Supreme Court; drive toward the curtailment and eventual destruction of democratic liberties and civil rights; create the storm troops of reaction, Black Legions, Ku Klux Klans, etc. (4) Seize control of

all governmental machinery, moving toward a full-fledged fascist regime, in "American" and "constitutional" ways. (5) Develop extreme jingoist nationalist moods among the masses; drive toward war under cover of "American isolation" and "neutrality;" support to and alliance with Hitler and other fascists preparing the new world war.

The other chief direction of possible development, Browder said, moves and must move toward an opposite set of aims:

(1) Restore and raise the living standard of the masses by higher wages, shorter hours, lower prices; extending the trade unions to the basic industries and all workers, through militant industrial unionism; secure the farmers in possession of their farms, with governmental help and guarantee of a minimum standard of life. (2) Consolidate and extend social and labor legislation with guarantee of a minimum standard of life for all, financing this with sharply-graduated taxes on incomes, property and accumulated surpluses, abolition of sales taxes, balancing the budget at the expense of the rich. (3) Curb the usurped power of the Supreme Court; maintain and extend democratic rights and civil liberties; disperse reactionary bands, abolish the use of legal machinery to suppress the people's movements; extend popular control over government. (4) Restore control of the government to representatives of the people's organizations through a broad people's front. (5) Unite with the peace forces of the whole world to restrain the war-makers to keep America out of war by keeping war out of the world.

In relation to these two opposite sets of objectives, Browder declared without qualification that "the Landon-Hearst-Wall-Street ticket is the chief enemy of the liberties, peace and prosperity of the American people." Its victory, he said, would carry our country a long way on the road to fascism and war. Roosevelt and his administration are trying to pursue a middle course between these two opposite, fundamental directions of policy. On the one hand, they try to keep mass support by certain small concessions to the needs and demands of the people. On the other, they answer the pressure and attacks of the reactionary forces by greater concessions in that direction. It is a fatal mistake to depend upon Roosevelt to check the attacks of Wall Street, or to advance the fundamental interests of the people.

WHERE then, Browder asked, can the people turn to find a protection against the reactionary forces that assail them? The great majority, he said, are not yet prepared to turn to Socialism, as represented either by the Socialist Party or the

Communist Party. The Communists, therefore, come forward with an immediate program which the masses are ready to support. That immediate program arises out of the five fundamental aims of the masses as outlined above. This, Browder said, is not a program of revolutionary overthrow of capitalism; it can be realized within the framework of the present economic system by a people's government backed by the organized masses, determined to fight to keep Wall Street fascism out of power. This program is essentially covered by the platform adopted by the Farmer-Labor Party National Conference in Chicago on May 30-31.

The Communist Party, Browder said, had hoped to enter this year's elections with a Farmer-Labor national ticket. Already in May it had become clear that this was impossible. The Communist Party then proposed a joint presidential ticket to the Socialists. This offer was rejected. The Communist Party has no other alternative to choose in the presidential elections except to place in the field its own independent ticket.

This ticket will be placed in the service of creating that broader unity, the people's front. It will promote the growing mass movement in the states and congressional districts for Farmer-Labor tickets. The Communist campaign will be primarily on behalf of the people's front program. At the same time, the Party will carry on a mass campaign of education, on a scale never before attained, to teach the broad millions the meaning of socialism, of the working-class revolution, of the full Communist program which is the only final solution of the problems created for the population by a dying capitalist system.

The direct issue of the 1936 elections, Browder said, is not socialism or capitalism, but rather democracy or fascism. But he emphasized that a consistent struggle for democracy and progress leads inevitably, and in the not distant future, to the socialist revolution. On the basis of this analysis, he then summarized the parties and issues in the 1936 campaign as follows:

(1) The chief enemy of the peace, freedom and prosperity of the American people is the Republican Party and its reactionary allies. Hence we must defeat the Landon-Hearst-Liberty-League-Wall-Street alliance. (2) Roosevelt and his administration are retreating before the attacks of reaction and surrendering position after position to the main enemy. Hence we must stop the surrender of our rights and interests in Washington. (3) The Socialist Party, after breaking loose from its reactionary Old Guard, is moving into the backwater of doctrinaire sectarianism, drifting out of the mass currents of American life. Hence we must win the Socialists for the people's united front, for the Farmer-Labor Party. (4) The Farmer-Labor Party is rapidly growing in states and localities; it is organizing itself on a national scale. Hence we must support the

program and platform of the Chicago Farmer-Labor Conference, build the Farmer-Labor Party. (5) The Communist Presidential ticket is the only banner in the national elections rallying and organizing all the forces of the people against reaction, fascism and war, building the people's front in the United States. Hence we should vote the Communist Presidential ticket.

The Communist Party, Browder concluded, must use the opportunity of this election campaign to smash once and for all the superstition, which has been embodied in a maze of court decisions having the force of law, that the Party is an advocate of force and violence. The Communist Party, he said, is not a conspirative organization, it is an open revolutionary party continuing the traditions of 1776 and 1861. It is a legal party and defends its legality.

As Browder ended his keynote address with the slogans: *through liberty to socialism; forward in the struggle for a new and better life for the masses; forward to a free, peaceful, prosperous and happy America:* the delegates and visitors rose and spontaneously broke into a stormy ovation that lasted twenty minutes.

OTHER speakers went into greater detail on the various problems covered by the keynote speech. Jack Stachel brilliantly analyzed developments in the trade union movement and the tasks of the Communists in these unions. James W. Ford, who received a thundering ovation, which contrasted sharply with the treatment of Negro delegates at the Republican and Democratic conventions, rendered a stirring report on the Party's work among the Negroes. Robert Minor analyzed the Party's fight against war. Clarence Hathaway, Minnesota-born editor of the Daily Worker, exposed the "vague promises" and "demagogy" of the Republican and Democratic farm planks, and urged as the Communist task the drawing of the trade unions closer to the farmers. Margaret Cowl and Mother Bloor, beloved 73-year old labor leader, reported on the struggles of the women; and Gil Green, secretary of the Young Communist League, on the youth.

An ovation full of affection was accorded to the 21-year old proletarian fighter and champion of the Negro people who was introduced as "our beloved and great Comrade Angelo Herndon." He spoke for a "united Negro people's movement together with white workers." Herbert Benjamin, Organization Secretary of the Workers Alliance, described the unification of leading unemployed organizations; and M. J. Olgin, editor of the Freiheit, drew a picture of widespread anti-semitic movements in the United States, their relation to fascism, and the growth of the united front among the Jewish masses.

One of the most important reports was made by Charles Krumbein, who described

the new forms of Party organization, which are to follow the regular geographic lines of state, county and district, with a national committee along the broadest lines. Three fraternal delegates—Tim Buck of Canada, Hernan Laborde of Mexico and Antonio Rodriguez of Cuba—reported on developments in their respective countries and in the Communist parties they represented.

ALWAYS the speeches were factual, full of specific ideas, facing problems to be overcome, the careful discussion of victories achieved. You could go on like this for pages; for what was true of the main reports was equally true of the reports from the districts. You could have heard a pin drop when William Weinstone, Michigan organizer, discussed the Black Legion or John Williamson, Ohio organizer, described with a wealth of detail the trade union struggles in his district—Akron and Kent especially—and the consequent growth of a state Farmer-Labor Party; or when Roy Hudson described the struggles of the seamen and longshoremen and the need for a maritime industrial union.

As these paragraphs are being knocked off to catch a deadline, the Sunday New York Times comes into the office with the statement that the whole Democratic convention in Philadelphia "has been nothing but a build-up for the appearance of Franklin D. Roosevelt." At the Communist convention there were no staged effects. There was plenty of spontaneous cheering, sincere affection for leaders whose "build-up" has come through hard work. But the thing that stuck most in your mind, was the array of thought-out, serious reports on conditions in the United States and the Communist Party's actual work in trade unions, in central labor bodies, in organizations of the unemployed, Negroes, youth; in the organization of Farmer-Labor Parties on a local and state scale; in Socialist Party branches.

Earl Browder closed the convention, pointing to the "unshakable unity of our Party," its winning of the "confidence and respect of great masses of the people."

At Madison Square Garden, as I write, 25,000 gay, disciplined men and women, cheering and singing with an enthusiasm which makes all the other conventions this year look positively sick, are nominating Earl Browder, native Kansan, for President; and James W. Ford, Negro leader, for Vice-President of the United States on the Communist ticket. A platform is adopted which clearly and boldly proposes measures, in detail so specific that any worker or farmer can at once grasp its meaning. There is a full-throated response from a packed Garden to the platform's closing lines:

Today the immediate issue is democracy or fascism; but the consistent fight for democracy in the conditions of declining capitalism will finally bring us to the necessary choice of the socialist path.

Roosevelt's Convention

MARGUERITE YOUNG

PHILADELPHIA.

“WE meet . . . at a time . . . of great moment to the future of the Nation.” President Roosevelt’s urbane phrases traveled rhythmically across the playing ground. They struck and echoed sharp as arrows against the double tier of concrete seats slanting back and up into the sky over Franklin Field.

Pressed around him on the platform were the Boisterous Bourbons and the Tammany Tycoons who made the Democratic convention a five-day nauseum. In the front row sat their apotheosis, Cactus Jack Garner, banker and landlord and wheelhorse. His sharp red face was now expressionless and cold as ice. A moment ago, standing with Roosevelt before the cameras grinding in the newsreels’ cage, Garner grinned. It was the same cynical grin as the one he wore when bibulously swapping stories with Republican cronies—in the complete bipartisan intimacy of Congressional leaders who serve the same masters under different party labels.

Yet at certain moments there at Franklin Field the heart expanded. One hundred thousand people were listening in those stands. The physical and spiritual impact of them, massed, silently intent upon a speech addressed directly to them and their fellow millions, lent the scene impressiveness, something the orgy in Convention Hall never could achieve.

Roosevelt adroitly made a class appeal based upon a falsehood. He used a simple device, the past tense where the present belonged. Kingdoms “were” built by “economic royalists,” by grace of the economic enslavement of others. Hours and wages “had” passed beyond the control of the people. Political equality “was” meaningless in the face of the economic inequalities of modern monopoly.

But only up to the advent of the New Deal! Since 1932, the President smoothly pretended, “*It is being ended.*” Ended by the New Deal, which, actually, buttressed monopoly.

Seeing it done, I gagged. Yet soon, I knew,

throngs such as this would gather and hear their own political spokesmen express their need and their solution in a real people’s party. It is the inescapable logic of the momentous “time” to which Roosevelt referred, a time of crystallizing class line-ups on the political as well as the economic front, and of clarification of issues despite all the old masters can do to prevent it.

On Wednesday, already worn from the organized hullabaloo in the hall and individual hoopla along Broad Street through the night, the delegates assembled in a session that was turned literally into a vaudeville show. As they emerged, Congressman Byron Scott, a California Epic, remarked, “After all we have endured, they might have given us at least one fan dancer.”

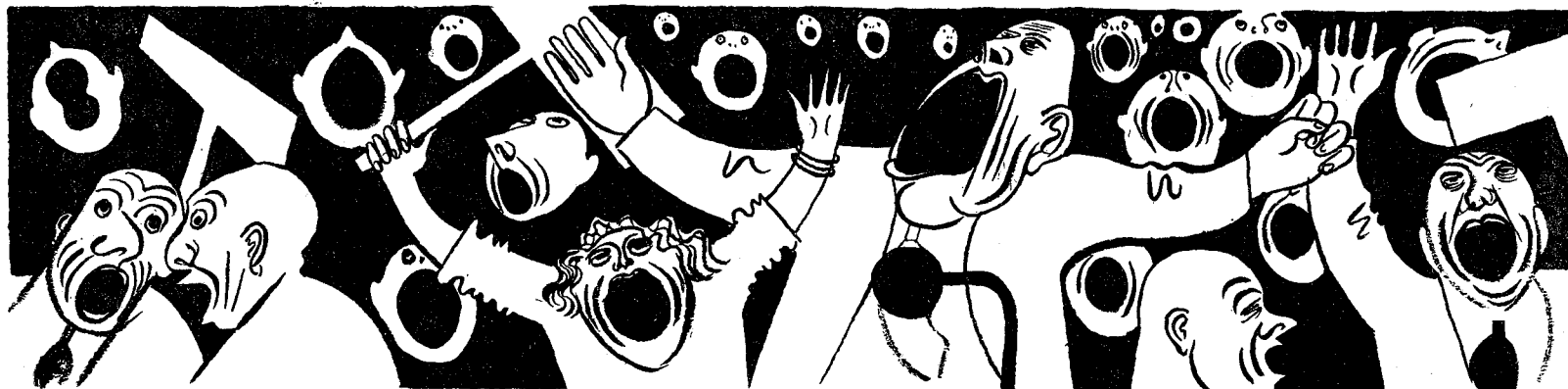
The resolutions committee was meeting in the auditorium ballroom. Senator Wagner solemnly announced they would hear everybody and then proceed to “write” the platform. Suppressed giggles at the press tables belied him. Everybody knew the platform had been drafted and would be redrafted if necessary in President Roosevelt’s White House study. Solemnly, however, the platform builders sat together on the left side of the room. Less than half of them were present by the time the session got going, and these soon began to drift away. They were, on the whole, the typical stuff of the ancient machines of Tammany and Pendergast, plus New Deal camp followers who were essentially disinterested in the whole affair. The latter were prepared, regardless of personal inclinations, to follow Roosevelt’s word. There were a few exceptions—such as Senators Black of Alabama and Bulkley of Ohio, who sought specific liberal planks; and Senators Bailey of North Carolina, Byrnes of South Carolina, Walsh of Massachusetts, equally determined upon extreme reaction as a matter of principle.

It was pouring rain. Soon the roof began to leak and water dropped from the ceiling. So sparsely occupied was the committee section that for hours no one noticed. Then a

few casually shifted to other chairs. That was all. A subcommittee went into a back room to get to work on the proposals, theoretically, though the presentation was yet to be completed.

There appeared here a succession of witnesses such as never before seen at an old party’s convention. Not only were there representatives of newer militant mass organizations . . . the Southern Tenant Farmers, the League against War and Fascism, Joe Curran and his seamen followers, there were spokesmen for long-established labor and liberal groups, raising demands that strikingly reflected the growing unity of the people upon minimum immediate guaranties against the reaction that cuts ever wider swaths. Here came an old pacifist clergyman, raising, verbatim, a slogan that appears in the Communist platform of 1936: “Keep America out of war by keeping war out of the world!” A woman speaking for the National Woman’s Party, once opposed to protective legislation for women on principle, now underscored that their desire for sex equality did not mean they opposed minimum-wage legislation for all. They did not volunteer it, but inquiry disclosed that the New York minimum-wage decision has set the faces of increasing numbers of this group toward a positive labor program; only thus, they began to perceive, can they safeguard equal rights. Here likewise spoke a woman long associated with the Consumers’ League, seeking minimum wages guaranteed by Constitutional Amendment. That was the central popular demand, Constitutional Amendment. It reached a climax with Heywood Broun’s soft, round voice booming over the microphone: “The Newspaper Guild feels that any plank adopted by the Democratic party in regard to collective bargaining will be inadequate without an additional plank favoring a constitutional amendment to protect labor in its right to organize.”

Reporters dropped their tools to clap! They cheered Broun again when he uttered fighting words, such as the Democratic



Gus Peck