

The Communists in France

RAOUL DAMIENS

The following exclusive interview with Maurice Thorez, general secretary of the French Communist Party, is the first to appear in any American publication and was cabled by our correspondent.

Spurred by the electoral victory of the People's Front, the French working class struck spontaneously. The movement rapidly grew until over a million workers, emulating the strikers in the metallurgical industries, demanded economic improvement and employer recognition of their organizations. Workers in industry, transport and commerce occupied factories and shops wherever demands were refused. By combining discipline with firm insistence upon their demands, the strikers prevented the reactionaries

from provoking a state of chaos which might have endangered the Blum government.

When the People's Front government took office, it immediately vindicated the trust placed in it. The government itself brought pressure upon employers' organizations and ended the strike with general wage increases, recognition of the unions (initiating the "closed-shop era") and the granting of collective bargaining.

As we go to press, white-collar employes, heartened by the victory, follow the lead of workers in industry and strike for their demands. The government, through Léon Blum, has promised to enact within the next few weeks legislation granting the forty-hour week and vacations with pay.—THE EDITORS.

PARIS, June 8.

MAURICE THOREZ—miner, farmer, bricklayer, ex-political prisoner—is today, despite his youth, the effective and active leader of the Communist Party of France. You will understand his ability to hold this position when you look at this thirty-six-year-old leader, when you talk to him, when you hear him address meetings or receive the press, when you listen to him debate in the Chamber of Deputies or handle truckmen on strike.

He is at home in every society, among ministers, longshoremen, ambassadors, police officials. He has brains and courage, ardor and suppleness, humor and authority. His vast knowledge of politics, economics and history was not gathered at school but laboriously through study and experience. He is the French Communist Party's diplomat, strategist, organizer and beloved upholder of people's rights. Whenever a delicate job arises, Maurice Thorez is delegated to perform it. Look at his round, pug-nosed, boyish countenance, his twinkling, merry, brown eyes, his simplicity and vitality and you will guess why this youth, a member of the Party from his 'teens, has skyrocketed in a few years from the Secretaryship of the Pas de Calais section to the head of the French Communists.

You will understand his rise better still if you know his labors and achievements which, since 1934, have been more than almost any other one man's. He is the architect of the united action with the Socialist Party which blocked fascism in the recent electoral victory of the People's Front.

When I saw him at a meeting last week I said, "Comrade Thorez, for months now THE NEW MASSES has asked me to interview you, but you have been so pressed with work that I refused to pursue you."

"You are a good fellow to spare me," he answered.

"But now that there is a bit of a let-up," I said, "will you give me an appointment?"

"With pleasure, Comrade."

He received me on Friday, June 5, in his bare, tiny office at Party headquarters between sessions of the Chamber of Deputies. I asked him about the strikes that are now sweeping France, their origin and significance.

"After five years of depression," he began, "after workers have been underpaid and overworked, after unemployment and misery and the arrogance of the bosses, the victory of the People's Front resulted in the outburst of impatience on the part of the working class. Strikes broke out in the most exploited trades and spread to the unemployed. This mass movement, like the People's Front itself, is spontaneous and just as disciplined. The great initial danger in the strike movement was that it might disrupt the popular unity and cause irritation among small shopkeepers, peasants and consumers with their working-class brothers. As a Communist fruit-grower of Gard wired, 'You won't let my cherries rot in the markets, Comrades?' So we whispered to the food handlers, 'No nonsense with babies' milk, with the housewives' market baskets, with the tradesmen's living, with the farmers' produce.' As *L'Humanité* put it, 'everything is not possible at this time.' The workers understood and kept within the broad limits. With the cities' food assured, public sympathy was bound to remain with the strikers."

"What, Comrade Thorez, is the Communist conception of the People's Front?"

"The People's Front is very dear to the Communist Party. Ever since February 9, 1934, we have labored unceasingly, first, to gain united action with the Socialist Party comrades and next, with the Radical Socialists, thus creating a United Front against the fascist menace. As early as the Nantes Congress of the Radical Socialists in October, 1934, we said that it is not true that there

is no immediate alternative except between Doumergue and the setting up of Soviets. There was room at that time for a policy more nearly corresponding to the people's needs. We insisted on a common front of all proletarians at all costs and the reunification of the General Confederation of Labor (trade unions). It was the Communists who proposed the intertwining of the Red and the Tri-colored flags. We wrote the united oath of July 14, 1935. We were not afraid to proclaim that we love our country and therefore would not let the fascist shame sweep over us. This policy did not stem from the Soviet Union; we French Communists assumed full responsibility for it. We naturally rejoiced when Dimitrov at the Eighth Congress of the Communist International upheld us and recommended the French model of the People's Front to other sections everywhere in the world.

"Why did we do this? Because the elections of 1934 showed certain sections of the middle class were being seduced by fascism as they had been before in Germany and Austria. We were ready despite all sacrifices to obviate such a calamity in France."

"Will the People's Front local committee continue in existence?" I wanted to know.

"The Socialists do not agree with us in this policy. They propose to set up merely skeleton political organizations, but the People's Front was never purely a political organization. We asked for, and the people approved, mass units which include not only the voters, but women and youth. The Radical Socialists want no organization at all. Meanwhile, these committees have grown spontaneously in strength and number. The masses are determined to keep alive the organization which saved their liberties. Victory at the polls is only the beginning. A few weeks hence the Paris district will hold its first Congress of People's Front Committees."

"One more question," I said, "and I'll let you alone."

"Thanks," smiled Maurice Thorez, "I will be grateful for that. The Communist deputies are being seated in the Chamber and every man's presence is now necessary."

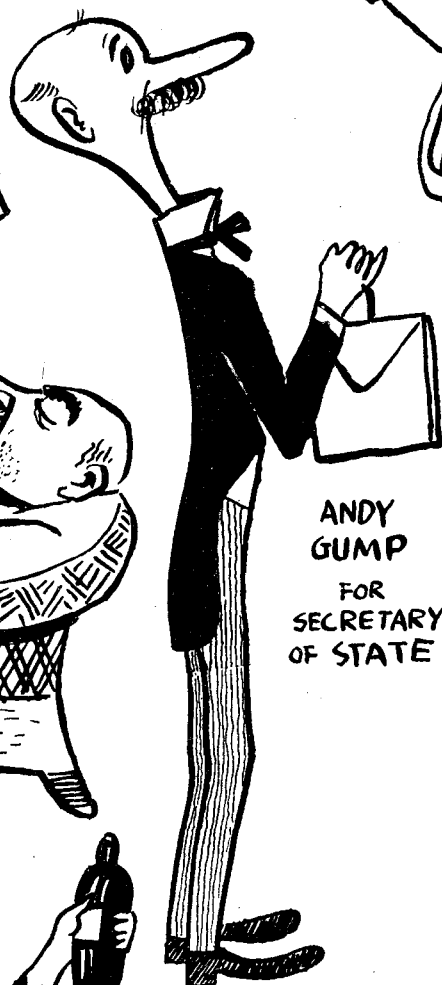
"How do you like the present government?"

"I will judge by its fruits," he answered. "If it carries out the program of the People's Front steadily and vigorously, if it democratizes the army, the bureaucracy and the judiciary, if it adopts the public-works program and grants amnesty to political prisoners, if it gives farm aid, passes a capital levy and dissolves the fascist leagues, we will like it and give it unstinted, uninterrupted backing."

BILL GROPPER NOMINATES —



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WORKS
ADMINISTRATOR



REP. ZIONCHECK
FOR
BRAIN TRUST



BABY LE ROY
FOR
SPEAKER OF
THE HOUSE

PEARL L.
BERGOFF
FOR
SECRETARY
OF LABOR



MICKEY MOUSE
FOR THE
U.S. SUPREME COURT

Pholpey.

Our "House of Lords"

J. L. PETERSON

IN REPORTING on the decision of the United States Supreme Court declaring the New York Minimum Wage Law unconstitutional, the newspapers stated that the decision "shocked" Congressional leaders as well as political leaders generally in Washington and elsewhere. Among the persons thus shocked was Governor Herbert H. Lehman of New York, whose brother, Judge Irving Lehman of the New York State Court of Appeals, wrote the dissenting opinion on behalf of the minority, when that law was declared unconstitutional a few months ago by the State Court of Appeals in a four-to-three decision.

There was good reason why the intelligent upholders of the present system should be shocked. This decision makes one thing clear beyond the shadow of doubt: the Supreme Court is determined to make it impossible for capitalism to reform itself in this country, and thus prolong its precarious existence. To all those liberals and the more intelligent conservatives, who hoped for a "progressive" capitalism, guided and ruled by a regenerated United States Supreme Court, this decision says: "Abandon Ye All Hope." No wonder they are shocked.

Some years ago a Professor of Law at Harvard University, an upholder of our constitutional system and an admirer of the United States Supreme Court, said in an article describing the functions of that august body, that the United States Supreme Court was in effect the American House of Lords, and that its function was to interpret the United States Constitution in a manner so as to embody in our fundamental law the views of the intelligent leaders of the capitalist class as to how the country ought to be governed. That article was written during what has been called the Progressive Era of the United States Supreme Court, and was probably a correct description of the Supreme Court in progressive mood.

This means that at best this country is governed by a House of Lords, for which no provision is made in the United States Constitution, instead of by Congress and the President as therein provided, or by the people of the United States as is commonly supposed.

But the Supreme Court is not always on its best behavior. And when it is in one of its reactionary moods the American people have probably the worst possible government known to any modern civilized country, with the exception of those dominated by Mussolini and Hitler. At its worst, the rule of the Supreme Court is not only vicious but stupid. It is that stupidity which

on such occasions, shocks its more intelligent supporters.

The Court was in such a mood in the Harding "back-to-normalcy" days, and it has been in such a mood during its Anti-New Deal phase. It is very significant that during both these eras the Court's hardest blows have been aimed at labor; and in both periods the attack took the form of declaring minimum wage laws unconstitutional. The latest decision is particularly vicious because in order to render it the majority of the Court had to state, in effect, that it had been thoroughly dishonest in making the first minimum wage law decision in 1923. This is particularly stupid because it comes at the end of a series of other decisions in which social legislation has been held unconstitutional on the pretext that it diminishes the power of the states, thereby attempting to pose as the defender of states' rights—a pretext which is now belied by its abrogating a legislative right of the States which even conservatives like Chief Justice Hughes must insist the States possess.

The history of these two decisions, and a comparison of the two, is extremely instructive. The first case involved a Federal statute passed by Congress in 1918, providing for the fixing of minimum wages for women and children in the District of Columbia, which is governed directly by Congress as the law-making power. It was then hoped by "progressives" and "liberals" that this statute would be a model for the country, and would be copied by all the States, thus introducing a progressive era in capitalism. But these progressives and liberals had reckoned without the nation's final arbiters—the United States Supreme Court. When that Court got around to it, during the blessed days of the Harding Administration, it decided to put its foot down on these beginnings of "progressive capitalism"—convinced, presumably, that progress and capitalism are incompatible. So at least a majority of the Court decided—for the decision was made five to four. Chief Justice Taft and Justices Holmes, Brandeis and Sanford, dissented; they claimed that there was nothing in the Constitution permitting the Supreme Court to invalidate the law. The decision was a body blow to progressive capitalism at the time, but we were then—in 1923, on the eve of the "boom"—in the "new economic era"—which was supposed to spell prosperity for all, and the country did not mind how reactionary capitalism was. "Liberals" and "progressives" were duly shocked, but did nothing about it. In the prosperous days that followed, the matter was completely forgotten. But when the

depression came, it was found that the lack of minimum wage laws and other social legislation had considerable to do with bringing on the depression. And when the devil of capitalism was sick, the devil a saint would be. Or if not exactly a saint, at least a progressive devil. The New Deal, therefore, made attempts, both Federal and State, to pass minimum wage laws in one form or another. One of these was the New York State Minimum Wage Law for Women.

In framing the new law, the legislators had, of course, to reckon with the Supreme Court decision. Nevertheless, they hoped to overcome it for two reasons: In the first place, it was hoped that the Supreme Court, having learned something from the depression, would be in a more "progressive" frame of mind; and, secondly, the New York legislators took care to frame the law in such a manner as to meet the particular ground upon which the Supreme Court had invalidated the District of Columbia law in 1923. That decision had said that the reason for the invalidation of the Act of Congress was that the Act provided that women should be paid a *living wage*. This, the Court said, means that the wage would have no relation to a "fair" compensation for the services rendered or the "fair" volume of these services. The Supreme Court now holds not only that neither the federal nor the state government has the right to provide for a *living wage* for women; but also neither can they provide for *fair compensation* to be paid to women for services rendered; nor compel any employer to pay women the *fair value* of their services. In so doing, the Court gives the lie direct to the reason it gave for its earlier decision. And the Court exposes the viciousness of the capitalist system, and the hopelessness of any basic reform by what the upholders of the present order are pleased to call "constitutional methods."

No wonder the upholders of the present system are shocked and worried! This decision proves that the Harvard professor was wrong when he thought that this country is ruled by a House of Lords which runs the country in accordance with the views of intelligent capitalists. This decision proves that this country is run by a House of Lords gone mad.

How to curb the insane rulers of this country is the principal problem before the American working class today. Whether, and how far, it can count upon a solution of this problem or any other elements in the social structure of American society is the question upon which its attention is now centered.