



William Gropper

The Youth vs. Roosevelt

Joseph Starobin reports the American Youth Congress Citizenship Institute. What happened, and what it means. Labor and youth vs. the administration. What may come by November.

THE old locomotive of history took a very sharp turn last weekend, a great turn. Five thousand boys and girls of the American Youth Congress were on that train; a good many arrived in Washington riding the rails. Average kids: youngsters from the schools, trade union rank-and-filers, many still in their teens, hundreds of Negro delegates from the deep South, a better delegation than ever before. The little Finnish girl with the peaches-and-cream complexion from the Atlas Social and Athletic Club of Gardner, Mass., was there. She told the truth about Baron Mannerheim. Rita Vermillion, whose sharecropper family wandered down Highway 66 in southeast Missouri: she was there and told her story. Young seamen spoke up proudly in the name of their union. A Harvard boy, clipped hair and clipped accent, told how his campus wanted to hear Earl Browder. From the Tulsa, Okla., oil country a young lad related why his father's been on strike for fourteen months.

They came all day Friday, and all Friday night. Carefully calculated nickels and dimes paid their way. Buses plodded over the mountains; three in the front seat and two in the rumble, they arrived in time to join the parade down Constitution Avenue Saturday noon. They sang "No, Major! No, Major! No!" to the tune of "Oh Johnny." New slogans like "The Yanks Are Not Coming" and "Bury the Slums Before They Bury Us" swept through the ranks. "Nothing Irks Like Cuts in Public Works," said some posters, the colors blurring in the rain.

THEY WERE SORE

These kids were sore. Sore about the whitening of National Youth Administration allowances, sore about the slicing of WPA, dismayed by the implications of the President's foreign policy. Angry, some of them, because their friends that very week had been bound in chains at the Milan, Mich., penitentiary for a crime to which most of them were ready to plead guilty: for had they not all spent many a weekend collecting coins so that the youth of Spain might live?

There were great stakes in this Citizenship Institute. Even greater to be sure than the passage of S. 3170, the American Youth Act. Five hundred million is what they ask to tide young people over the out-of-school, out-of-work age. The American Youth Congress had been chummy with the New Deal for some years. A Youth Congress rally in Detroit in the summer of 1935 first heard the news from Washington that the National Youth Administration was a fact. "I am very, very fond of many of your leaders," Eleanor Roosevelt told them in the Labor Department auditorium on that climactic

Sunday night. That was true: their leaders had lunched at the White House, weekended often at Hyde Park. Eleanor Roosevelt knew them well. She had stakes in their future.

Mr. Farley knows what the Youth Congress means in terms of votes. Four million youngsters collaborate in this unique clearing house for sixty-three national youth organizations. No political force could ignore what this pilgrimage meant. But this year, it meant all that it had in the past, and several times more. Not a young man or young woman hasn't rubbed his or her eyes at what's been happening these past six months. FDR himself slashed the budget. Martin Dies got the green light from 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. Finland has become a technique for nullifying the provisions of Mr. Roosevelt's Neutrality Act, into which was written a pledge that loans to belligerents would never again lead the youth to war. Two years ago, Aubrey Williams, now head of NYA, had to be restrained from calling for the social revolution at an AYC confab; it was headline stuff. Yet ten days ago, Williams himself gave the order to turn the names of NYA workers over to the U. S. Army. Nobody asked the workers their consent.

Young people want to know why this is happening, where it's all going. They came to the capital full of fight, full of alarm and indignation, heavy with the mandate of millions back home.

THE CROSSROAD

This was the pilgrimage of a great decision. To the administration, it meant swinging the youth movement for its foreign policy, for November 1940. Or else, it meant confusing their counsels, developing from within some nucleus that might break it apart. Should this movement defy the administration, it becomes a factor to be reckoned with, in an entirely new sense. To the delegates themselves, this was a pilgrimage for ideals and goals that shall not be betrayed. It was a crossroad in the search for employment, a guarantee of civil liberties, a warning that no statesman, whatever his past services, could reckon upon their support for war.

Forty-four hundred crowded through the White House gates according to the count; they assembled in a dense mass before the south portico. Newsreel cameras whirled as they sang "America the Beautiful," and threw their hats into the air when Jack McMichael, blond and genial chairman, led them in cheers from the White House steps. "Pass the American Youth Act" echoed against the great windowpanes from which Abe Lincoln watched the ice break in the Potomac on his last birthday 75 years ago to the day.

Little did they realize as the familiar tim-

bre of the Roosevelt voice cut through the rain what he had prepared. First came the statistical windup, a defense of the New Deal that had been "seriously mangled and garbled by certain types of papers and certain types of politicians." Then came the warning: "Don't expect Utopia overnight. Don't seek or expect a panacea—a grand, new law that will give you a handout. . . ." That caught them off guard; it came like a foul blow. Yes, he admitted, no plan exists to solve their problem offhand. On second thought, he wasn't at all certain "that your opportunities for employment are any worse today than they were for young people ten or twenty years ago." That began to gripe. Cold, soaking feet stirred uneasily on the muddy lawn. Again, "we have not found a method of spreading employment to more people when good times come."

TALKING TO EUROPE

So what was the answer? In three paragraphs, punctuated by a bitter grotesque leer, he warned them "not as a group to pass resolutions on subjects which you have not thought through, and on which you cannot possibly have complete knowledge." As for calling this an imperialist war, that was "twaddle." Mrs. Roosevelt, standing near at hand, stiffened as the cold silence gripped the crowd. One reporter chose the moment to light his cigarette; another stamped an unfinished butt into the soggy earth.

From then on, he wasn't talking down, but beyond their heads. Way above, to the nation, beyond the nation to Europe. This was the sharpest assault in recent history against peoples who inhabit one-sixth of the earth. As he gave them the "I-Came-To-Russia-Prepared-to-Love-It" line, the "Russia-Was-Okay-Until" sarsaparilla, the gap between the young people on the lawn and the man on the portico widened visibly.

It was sharp, bitter, vindictive, and deliberate; the boos froze in their throats. They stood for minutes and minutes after he was finished; they went through the stanzas of "America the Beautiful" in something of a trance. Swarming through the wide White House gates, they were eager to be gone.

One hour later John L. Lewis formed the answer out of their own inchoate emotions. And these young people shouted in relief; the auditorium rang out with their laughter, the first real laughter of the day. Lewis made a serious, a genuine speech. He spoke with forthrightness and substance. What had the President given them this morning in the rain? Statistics. And what had he said of their right to determine the character of the European war? Twaddle. "Well, that statement comes to a head-on clash with my con-