

Draper's "Roots of American Communism"

By WILLIAM Z. FOSTER

THEODORE DRAPER'S new book, *The Roots of American Communism*,* is one of a series of studies to be published on various aspects of Communism in the United States, under the auspices of the Fund for the Republic, which has the backing of the Ford millions. The book in question, summing up C.P. "history" until 1923, is just one more bourgeois attempt to demean and distort the history of the CPUSA. It is part of the current intense ideological campaign being waged against the Communist Party of this country.

The Draper volume has been composed with all the ordinary bourgeois limitations in history writing. Besides, its author is an anti-Communist and the book is marred by evidences of the characteristic prejudice of such elements. He has also had the active cooperation of various ex-Communists, including Earl Browder, and his book shows it. Draper is obviously out to make a case against the Party, hence to speak of his book as an objective study, as some reviewers are doing, is nonsense.

* Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism*, 500 pp., \$6.75, Viking Press, N. Y.

Draper's book is characterized by the customary bourgeois superficiality. If the author, during his years as a member of the Communist Party, learned anything about Marxist historical analysis, his writing betrays very few, if any, signs of it. Draper pictures the history of the Communist Party in a sort of economic and political vacuum, having no visible connection with the living conditions, organizations, and struggles of the working class. This shallowness, however, has much more significance than the usual tendency of bourgeois historians to ignore the basic driving forces in society. What the author is striving to prove is that the CPUSA is an artificially created Russian political instrument in the United States, without any basic connections with the American working class and its struggles for economic and political betterment. This obvious bias and superficiality of Draper's book eliminates the possibility of its standing as an authentic history of the American Communist Party for the period it covers, up to 1923.

Manifestly, the fledgling Communist Party in the United States, as in other countries, was profoundly

influenced by the combined effects of the Russian Revolution and the newly-organized Communist International; but especially it represented the historic Left wing of the Socialist movement in this country, reaching back for many decades and reacting to the conditions, struggles, and aspirations of the American working class. No work can presume to be a history of the CPUSA which does not give full weight to these national considerations, as well as to the international factors entering into its formation. Failure to do this is a central weakness of Draper's book.

Characteristic of Draper's studied attempt to divorce the CPUSA from the American class struggle, he portrays the formation of the Communist Party mostly in the shape of more or less sinister international forces at work creating the new Party, almost without any reference whatever to the huge and bitter struggles of the workers during these years. The period of the formation of the CPUSA, especially between 1919 and 1922, was marked by one of the sharpest series of mass struggles in the history of the American labor movement—with millions of workers on strike, with an active repressive policy by the government, with a fierce, anti-union drive by the employers, and with almost every trade union in the United States fighting for its very life.

One of the keenest storm centers of this great mass struggle, which

was part of the worldwide post-war battles of the workers, turned around the formation of the Communist Party—with its violent repression by the government, the mass arrests of the Party leaders at Bridgeman in 1922, and the Communists' widespread participation in the class battles of the period. Draper completely ignores all these facts as though they never existed, because they do not fit into his preconceived thesis that the establishment of the CPUSA was a "Russian conspiracy," without real connection with the life of the American working class, nor to his conception that the Party's founding leaders and members were empty dreamers and incurable factionalists. Although Draper does not establish the fundamental relationship of the newly-formed Communist Party with the great class struggles of the times, the employers and other reactionaries currently did not fail to do so.

Specifically, Draper virtually ignores the activities of the Trade Union Educational League (TUEL) during these early years. The fact is, however, that, especially after the beginning of 1922, this organization, which was led by Communists, was a real factor in the labor movement and in the big strikes and other struggles of these years of hard battle for the workers. The TUEL had as its key slogans, the amalgamation of the craft unions into industrial organizations, the organization of the unorganized, the forma-

tion of a labor party, the recognition of Soviet Russia, and generally the development of a militant fighting policy by the workers to counter the powerful offensive of the employers. With its active participation in many big strikes of the period, the TUEL, based upon a Left-progressive united front, quickly became a national influence in Labor's ranks.

Beginning with a favorable vote of 114 to 37 in the Chicago Federation of Labor on March 19, 1922, the TUEL amalgamation movement spread like a prairie fire throughout the national trade union movement. During the next year and a half no less than 16 international unions, 17 of the biggest state federations of labor, scores of city central bodies, and thousands of local unions (3,377 in the railroad industry alone) formally endorsed the amalgamation slogan. The TUEL rightly claimed that the majority of organized labor in the United States (and also in Canada) had voted for this fighting slogan. Almost as broad results were achieved for the TUEL slogans for organizing the unorganized, for the labor party, etc. The heart of the TUEL's initial success was the active backing of the Communist Party. It was to participate more effectively in the big labor party movement of the period that the CP at this time moved its national headquarters to Chicago, and in open alliance with the C. F. of L. (Fitzpatrick forces), the Party, almost overnight, became a national force

in the growing labor party movement, which culminated in 1924 in the independent candidacy of Senator La Follette.

Draper ignores all this Communist participation in the mass struggle as though it never existed. This is necessary if he is to give a show of reality to his narrow conception that the young Communist Party was only a collection of factionalists, foreign-inspired intriguers, and people hypnotized by the Russian Revolution. Contrary to Draper's sneers and belittlements, Communism, during the latter of the years he deals with, showed a basic adaptation and relationship to American conditions. Notwithstanding its intense initial sectarianism and dogmatism, the deep confusion and ideological uncertainty accompanying the Socialist Party split, the ensuing splits in Communist ranks in mastering the principles of Marxism-Leninism, the severe persecution by the government, the lack of previous experience in trade-union work, and other handicaps — nevertheless, the Communist Party, only 2½ years after its birth in 1919 in two sections, was able to come forth as an active factor in the national labor movement and in the current intense class struggle. This was a major achievement, indicating beyond question that Marxism-Leninism, contrary to the theories of the Drapers, was not an alien doctrine in the United States and that Communism had genuine roots among the workers in

this country. Mr. Draper may not have been able to find any strong and practical Communist influence in the labor movement at that time, but certainly the government, the employers, and Samuel Gompers were very well aware of it.

In his bourgeois fashion, Draper devotes his main attention to the specific role of individuals in the formation of the CPUSA, rather than to the basic economic and political forces involved. Characteristically, he devotes several pages to the FBI spy, Morrow, of the Bridgeman convention, and he delights in tracing the many Party factional fights to their farthest nuances. He is always playing up the deserters and renegades from the Party, and when he deals with loyal Party leaders, especially John Reed, Robert Minor, and others, he gives distorted pictures of them. Also the book could almost pass for a biography of Draper's favorite figure, Louis C. Fraina, one of the Party's founders but a dubious political adventurer. Draper has a point in indicating the failure of the Party History to deal with Fraina; the book does not presume to outline all the leaders, but he is incorrect when he virtually plays up Fraina as the main founder of the Party. The leader in establishing the Communist Party was C. E. Ruthenberg, who gets a playdown in Draper's book. This fact is shown curiously on the book-cover, where the blurb-writer says: "Mr. Draper brings to life the individual leaders

[of the Party], including Foster, Browder, Fraina (Lewis Corey), and Reed." Significantly Ruthenberg is left out of this list—probably because the blurb writer had seen so little of Ruthenberg in the book. It comes almost as a surprise to the reader when, rather suddenly on page 193, Draper announces that, "The man who emerged from the convention in 1919, as the outstanding American Communist was Charles Emil Ruthenberg."

Of course, I, personally, am a special target for Draper's anti-Party animus. He dismisses as worthless "my" Marxist history of the Party. This book was, in fact, prepared by many co-workers, with me doing the actual writing. The text was read and passed upon by no less than 30 comrades. Naturally, the book now requires considerable re-writing in part (as is true of every Communist history in the world), especially in view of the recent long and intense Party discussion, the sweeping revelations of the Stalin cult of the individual, and particularly the new Communist policy of a more critical attitude towards other Communist parties and the countries of Socialism. But basically the book remains a sound presentation of the history of the CPUSA.

Letting slip no opportunity to take a dig at me, Draper, of course, dwells at length (page 313) upon my testimony before the Senate Committee on Education and Labor in 1919, in the midst of the great steel

strike and with regard to my attitude towards World War I. As I have explained in my book, *From Bryan to Stalin* (pages 126-139), I was opposed to the war, proposing that it be met with a general strike. But once the war had begun, following the German Social Democratic betrayal in 1914, I followed the line of actively organizing the trade unions in the basic industries, incorrectly holding, as a Syndicalist, that this was the most revolutionary work that could be done under the circumstances. I took the position that, with the high state of militancy existing among the workers, it would have been relatively easy for organized labor to unionize several millions of workers and to anticipate the C.I.O. by 15 years. Even with our group's tiny resources and with almost no financial help from the AFL, we led in the organization of the national packing industry (200,000 workers) and the national steel industry (365,000 workers). As for my Senate testimony, it in no way represented a complete picture of my views. It was a rather desperate attempt on my part to prevent the national steel strike, of which I was the central leader, from being torn to pieces by the red-baiters of the period upon the pretext that it was a militant revolutionary movement.

Mr. Draper, in dealing with the Russian Revolution and world Communism in general, displays the same shallowness that he does in

analyzing Communism in the United States. Considering Socialism a failure in the Soviet Union, as everywhere else, Draper completely underestimates the fundamental significance of the Russian Revolution, which struck the world capitalist system a blow from which it has never recovered and never will. By the same token, the writer has not the faintest conception of the general crisis of world capitalism, and thus really understands nothing basic of international economic and political conditions.

Draper takes many cracks at Lenin, whom he obviously considers less intelligent than his Fraina. He calls Lenin an "acrobatic opportunist," and he particularly scoffs, among many other things, at the general revolutionary perspective advanced by Lenin in the early stages of the Russian Revolution. But Lenin was fundamentally right in doing this. Following the brutal slaughter of the imperialist first world war, the workers were in a highly militant and rebellious mood, as Lenin foresaw. The consequence was the outbreak of powerful revolutionary movements, not only in Russia, but also in several other countries. In Germany not only did the workers overthrow the Hohenzollern empire, but also, for a short time, they had Soviets throughout the country; in Hungary they had a short-lived Soviet regime, and in Italy they brought the country to the very brink of a Socialist revolution. Obviously, it was a general

revolutionary situation. Had it not been for the Social Democratic betrayal in many countries, undoubtedly most of Eastern and Central Europe would have become Socialist, European capitalism would have received a mortal blow, and the whole world capitalist system would have been sent tottering. But of course all this is a blank to the bourgeois historian, Draper. Contrary to his political fantasies, the revolutionary course of events since World War I, with capitalism sinking ever deeper into general crisis and with one-third of the world now living under Socialist regimes, constitutes sufficient proof of the historical correctness of Lenin's general revolutionary outlook at the birth of the first Workers' Republic.

Reviewers are now generally praising the research work done by Draper in his book; but he has also committed a number of errors of fact. One of the lesser breed is his going along with the old horse-chestnut that my middle name is Zebulon—actually the "Z" is just a "Z" and nothing more. Inexplicable, however, is Mr. Draper's statement on page 251 that Lenin, in his famous booklet, *"Left-Wing" Communism*, cited no "American examples" in support of his devastating argument against sectarianism. But the reality was that Lenin specifically criticized the Industrial Workers of the World* for their sectarian dual unionism. Moreover, this criticism had profound effects upon the young

American Communist movement, which was dedicated to IWW dualism, but which broke with it under Lenin's sharp attack. It was precisely this position of Lenin's, as expressed in the pamphlet, *"Left-Wing" Communism*, that brought me into the Communist Party. For ten years previously, in various Syndicalist organizations, I had been fighting against IWW dual unionism; hence when the Communist Party was launched (as twins) I did not go along with it because it carried over the IWW dualist line, which I considered to be an impossible handicap. However, when Lenin, in his historic pamphlet, sharply condemned this disastrous expression of ultra-Left sectarianism, and I learned of it, I decided to join the Communist Party, which I did early in 1921.

Notwithstanding all the foregoing strictures there is considerable of value to be gleaned from the Draper book. From the standpoint of theory, the work stands almost at zero; but with the ample resources of the Fund for the Republic at his disposal, Draper has been able to assemble much important data. This includes, among other items, such as statistics and composition of the Communist movement at its outset, the names, circulation, and editors of the Left wing press of the times, facts upon the very im-

* See, V. I. Lenin, *"Left-Wing" Communism, An Infantsile Disorder* (International Publishers, N. Y., 1940), pp. 36-38.

portant "foreign-language" federations, organizational details (if not sound political analysis) of various early conventions, conferences, Party factional fights and splits, numerous valuable quotations from key documents of the Party's foundation period, factual material upon such little-known organizations as the Socialist Propaganda League and the Workers' Council.

Draper also makes many valuable thumb-nail sketches of American and international Communist leaders of the period; but here one has to tread

carefully, as the author's thick prejudices tend to give a lop-sided character to such studies of leading figures and their activities. Measuring, therefore, the limited and superficial good qualities of the book against its many basic theoretical and analytical weaknesses, the only conclusion that a Marxist-Leninist can arrive at regarding it is that in no decisive sense can it be taken as an authentic history of the Communist Party during its formation period, with which the book deals.