

# The Labor Party Illusion

Sam Weiner

The cry for a Labor Party in the United States is again being heard from various sides. Some of the Socialist Party people are agitating for it. The Trotskyists are currently in favor of it, and Meany, President of the AFL-CIO, climbs on and off of the bandwagon as the spirit moves him or as policy considerations of the moment appear to dictate.

Agitation for a Labor Party is almost as old as the labor movement itself. Numerous beginnings in this direction have at times been made. In 1829, the "Workingmens Party" in New York received 6,000 out of 21,000 votes, a higher proportion than any other independent movement has since achieved.

At times the sentiment for a Labor Party has been confined to small radical and liberal groups on the fringes of the broader labor movement. At other times powerful coalitions with a mass following, including unions and farmers' organizations, have organized large mass movements such as the Populists of the last century and the two "Progressive Parties" of Robert La Follette and Henry Wallace.

At the 1936 Convention of the AFL, 104 delegates, representing a powerful bloc of unions large and small, came close to committing the Federation to working for the establishment of a Labor Party. Such a policy would have been a reversal of the traditional position that called for "rewarding our friends and punishing our enemies" among the capitalist politicians of the Republican and Democratic Parties. Other examples of Labor Party attempts have been the American Labor Party in New York State and the Farmer Labor Party in Minnesota and adjoining states. In addition to those who have wanted a distinct political party of Labor, based on the unions, independent of and in opposition to the old-line parties, there have been organizations such as the Socialist Party, that oscillated between running their own candidates and supporting capitalist "friends of labor." Despite their differences, all of the radical tendencies supporting parliamentary action by the workers base their attitudes on the belief that such action can in some way alleviate or cure social evils.

Those who favor independent electoral action by Labor reason that-. "The United States is a democracy where the majority rules. We, the workers, farmers and small businessmen, are the majority of the people. We have voted for the Republicans and the Democrats and they have betrayed us. We must establish a political party controlled by ourselves and run our own candidates. They will surely be elected since we are a majority. Then the government controlled by us will legislate in our favor."

At first sight this appears reasonable. What could be simpler? However, a closer examination reveals that this argument is based on fundamental political and economic misconceptions. The idea of a Labor Party is based on the widespread myth that in a democracy the majority rules. This is a myth that must be exposed.

Leon Blum, the eminent French politician, whose vast and unsavory experience qualifies him as an expert on the subject, remarked that, "The parliamentary regime is a regime of *parties*." Jean Jacques Rousseau, the philosopher of democratic government, would not endorse "representative government" as it is practiced today. He wrote: "The deputies of the people should not and cannot be the people's representatives, they can only be its servants... The moment that people give power to their representatives, they abdicate their liberty." (*The Social Contract*)

The fundamental principle of *every* political party, regardless of the form of government, is the same. V.O. Key, professor of government at Yale University, in his penetrating and scholarly book, **Politics, Parties and Pressure Groups** has this to say:

**"It is sometimes said that the method by which a party seeks to gain control (of the government) is the unique characteristic of the party as a group. The American party uses the peaceful method of campaigning and appeal for popular support to gain power, which is said to differentiate it from the factions ... which struggle for power by the use of military force. The theory ... is advanced that the modern party and the democratic electoral process are but a sublimation, perhaps temporary, of the tendency to resort to force to gain control of the government... This theory gives a clue to the nature of the party struggle ... The term Party is applied equally to the peaceful parties of America and to the Communist Party of Russia, the Nazi Party of Germany, and the Fascist Party of Italy. The methodology of these parties varies, but their fundamental objective—to place and keep their leaders in control of the government—is the same."**

A capitalist democracy is a competitive society where predatory pressure groups struggle for wealth and prestige and jockey for power. Because such a society lacks inner cohesion, it cannot discipline itself. It needs an organism which will appease the pressure groups by satisfying some of their demands and prevent the conflicts among them from upsetting the stability of the system. The Government plays this role and in the process enacts more and more laws. The bureaucratic governing group thus becomes a class in itself with interests of its own, and becomes more firmly entrenched as it extends its influence.

The end result of this process will be reached when the State assumes ownership and/or control over the whole of society, establishing State Capitalism-or, if you prefer, State "Socialism." The United States is fast evolving in this direction.

At this stage in its drift towards totalitarianism, the governing group cannot rule alone. It needs the financial and moral support, at any given time, of most of the influential power groups: the financiers, the labor movement, the farmers, the press, the churches, as well as the military and civilian bureaucracies. Despite their differences, all these institutions and groups are inter-dependent and no one of them can stand without leaning on the others. Parliamentary democracy is, at this stage, the political system which safeguards the unjust economic and social order.

The actual rulers in a parliamentary democracy are the class of professional politicians. In theory, they are supposed to represent the people, but in fact they rule over them. They do not

represent. They decide. This is why Pierre Joseph Proudhon, the anarchist thinker, said, "Parliament is a King with 600 heads." The political parties, or more accurately, the inner clique that controls them, select the candidates for whom the people vote. The candidates express the will of the party and not that of the people. The platforms of the contending parties are adjusted to trick the voters into balloting for their candidates. Then the immense machinery of mass hypnotism goes into high gear. The press, the radio, television and the pulpit brainwash the public. The stupefied voter casts his ballot for candidates that he never nominated and never knew, whose names he forgets, and whose platforms he has perhaps never read. The electoral swindle is over. The voters go back to work (or to look for work) and the politicians are free to decide the destiny of the millions as they see fit.

Political machines seek to perpetuate themselves by all sorts of tricks. They sidetrack, channelize and emasculate the popular will. New politicians try to displace old ones by changing the electoral laws, while entrenched politicians defend outworn electoral systems when they feel that the new laws might weaken their positions and perhaps even abolish their sinecures.

For example, the politicians in the big cities are incensed at the politicians from the rural areas who control many state governments, because the state legislature dictates to the cities and deprives them of revenue. Representation in many state legislatures is not relative to actual population but according to districts and counties. These arrangements were made when America's population was predominantly rural. Since then the growing population has concentrated in the cities, yet the system of representation remains the same.

**The Painter and Decorator** of June, 1960, in an article entitled "All Votes Aren't Equal," gives many examples, such as:

"...fewer than 300 inhabitants of Union, Connecticut, have the same number of representatives in the states lower house as the city of Hartford, with a population of over 177,000-giving each Union voter the strength of 685 Hartford voters. Business groups generally defend unequal representation. They have learned that the conservative philosophy of small town lawyers and business men is often closely in line with their own views. Also, rural legislators may almost always be counted upon to oppose the objectives of organized labor... Such inequities are a major factor in American politics. In the South, political machines have used the county unit system to become self-perpetuating. In many northern states, huge city populations have been denied their proportional voice and vote in enacting legislation essential to their survival."

Labor Parties are no more immune to the diseases inherent in the parliamentary system than are other political parties. If new Labor Party legislators are elected they will have to "play the game" according to the established rules and customs. If they are honest, they will soon become cynical and corrupted and will be swallowed up by the machine. Most of them will find the new environment to their taste because they have already learned how to connive and bamboozle the public when they were operating as big wheels in their own union organizations. The administrations of most labor unions are patterned after the governmental forms of political parliamentary democracy. A course in the school of labor fakery prepares the graduates for participation in municipal, state and national government. When they take political office, they will not represent the members of the unions, but rather the political machine that controls the labor movement.

For the sake of illustration, let us assume that a strong Labor Party in the United States has succeeded in electing thousands of local, state and national officeholders as has happened in England, France, Germany and many other countries. The history of the parliamentary labor and socialist party movements in Europe gives us a good idea of what would happen to a similar movement in the U.S.

The record of the Labour Government which ruled Britain from 1945 to 1951 proves that it betrayed every socialist principle and violated nearly all its pre-election pledges. These betrayals were reflected in its domestic, foreign and colonial policies.

The direction of Labour Government policy was clearly formulated by a high party official, Sir Hartley Shawcross, in February, 1946: "I take the opportunity of making it quite clear that this Government like any Government as an employer, would feel itself perfectly free to take disciplinary action that any strike situation might develop demanded."

The Labour Party had pledged itself not to use troops as strike-breakers. Only six days after coming into power the Labour Government ordered troops to break a strike of London dockworkers. This was repeated three months later. The Government decreed wage freezes and compulsory arbitration.

Pre-election pledges to the effect that the unions would have direct representation in the management of state owned industries were forgotten. The Party, once in power, reversed its traditional opposition to military conscription in favor of *permanent peacetime* conscription.

In nationalizing the Bank of England, the coal mines, railways, canals and other utilities, the Labour Government guaranteed the stockholders the same income as before.

The principle behind these domestic policies guided Labour Party action in foreign and colonial affairs as well. Before the dropping of the atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August, 1945, President Truman had obtained the agreement of the British Labour Government. The military adventures in Greece, Egypt, Iran, Indonesia, Korea and elsewhere caused an increase in the "defense" budget from 692 million pounds in 1948 to 1032 million pounds in 1951. *One hundred and thirty six Spanish anti-fascists were deported into the arms of Franco to certain imprisonment, torture or death.*

The Labour Party's defeat in the last General Election was due primarily to the justified disappointment of the workers with its actions when in power. In 1945, Arthur Greenwood (Labour Government Privy Seal) said: "I look around my colleagues and I see landlords, capitalists and lawyers. We are a cross-section of the national life and this is something that has never happened before."

it is impossible for any political party of "Labor" to reach power without concessions to the Right—to the middle class—at the expense of basic principles. "Labor" (or "Socialist") parties lose their identity and eventually are found to differ only on minor points from the "conservative" contenders for power. Labor Partyism is class-collaboration in the political field and it is just as disastrous for the workers as class-collaboration has been in the economic field. There is every reason to believe that the same fate would befall an American labor party if one were established. Advocates of a labor party in the U.S. could profit by the lessons of the British Labour Party.

In the competition for votes, the original ideals and principles would be forgotten. The thousands of new officeholders would become a conservative force deeply rooted in the established order, and married to their jobs. They would establish rapport with the business community, with the large agricultural interests, with the clergy. They would cultivate the support of the press and other mass-media interests upon whose support they will come to depend. The Labor

Party would then be swamped by hordes of lawyers, bourgeois intellectuals, liberal churchmen, ambitious office-seekers and other careerists, who would infiltrate the organization. The honest workers and the radical elements would be forced into the background. Of “labor,” only the name would remain. The once proud Labor Party would become just another party in the machinery of the State.

Matthew Wohl, deceased Vice-President of the AFL (himself a first-rate conniver), in the debate with the labor party bloc at the 1936 Convention, let the cat out of the bag in an unguarded moment:

“I have watched these politicians in our movement. I followed their methods and regardless of how they talk of their trade union loyalty, my experience has been that when they enter the political arena they begin by talking as politicians, and very soon thinking like politicians, to the desertion of every trade union activity they pledged themselves to become part of.”

The various factions inside the American labor movement were always sharply divided on the question of parliamentary action in general and the labor party issue in particular. There are factions that believe in the class struggle and also in parliamentary action.

In our opinion, tactics must flow from principles. The tactic of parliamentary action is not compatible with the principle of class struggle. Class struggle on the economic field is not compatible with class collaboration on the political field. This has been demonstrated throughout the whole history of the labor movement in every land. Parliamentary action serves only to reinforce the institutions that are responsible for social injustice — the exploitative economic system and the State.

The strength of the labor movement lies in its economic power. Labor produces all the wealth and — provides all the services. Only the workers can fundamentally change the social system. To do this, they do not need a labor party, since by their economic power they are in a position to achieve the social revolution that is indispensable for human progress. As long as the means of production are in the hands of the few and the many are robbed of the fruits of their labor, any participation in the political skullduggery which has as its sole purpose the maintenance of this system, amounts to tacit and direct support of the system itself. By electoral participation in any form, radicals become accomplices in the fraud.

The North American labor movement today is reactionary. Almost all of the unions are tyrannically controlled by unprincipled bureaucrats and not a few by racketeers, whose ethics are those of the predatory social system in which they operate. They practice class collaboration, and uphold the doctrine that the interests of the employer and his victim, are identical. This is a secret from no one. In the August, 1958 issue of **Harpers Magazine**, Dick Bruner, expolitical staff executive of the CIO, wrote:

**It (the labor movement) lacks its own ideas. On many of the most fundamental political and social issues, it is hard to distinguish Labor’s position from that of the National Association of Manufacturers. It has adopted the ‘mass market’ concept of the big corporations and its leaders treat the rank and file with contempt!”**

Any serious Labor Party that is formed will be under the domination of this corrupt, collaborationist union bureaucracy. The same leaders who have repeatedly sold out the workers at the bargaining table will repeat their betrayals in the legislative bodies. Labor Partyism means class

collaboration on the political field. The same disastrous results are inevitable since It involves making concessions to classes whose interests are diametrically opposed to the basic interests of the working class.

Selig Perlmann, the well-known labor historian, in **A Theory of the Labor Movement**, says:

**“Under no circumstances can labor here afford to arouse the fears of the great middle class for the safety of private property as a basic institution. Labor needs the support of public opinion, meaning the middle class, both rural and urban.....**

The middle class, as the name implies, allies itself not only with the labor legislators, but also with the military faction, the financial interests and other anti-labor pressure groups, when it feels that it has something to gain thereby. The Labor Party will then be forced to support their middle class allies for fear of retaliation when they need its support for some of their own measures. This being the case, it is bound to lose whatever identity it did have, and become as corrupt as any of the old parties.

Those who are today beating the drum loudest for the ‘Labor Party are radicals of various Marxist or pseudo-Marxist groups. These same people will tell you that they believe in the class struggle and economic action by the workers. Some will explain that parliamentary action is only a gimmick to gain a public forum, or free time on television every four years. Others claim that parliamentary action is necessary to supplement and make economic action more effective.

Nothing could be more dangerous to the workers’ cause. Electioneering diverts the attention of the working class from militant struggles into essentially counter-revolutionary channels. It vitiates their confidence in the class struggle and in their own independent economic power.

In the supplement to Elzbacher’s **Anarchism**, Rudolf Rocker deals with this problem in the following terms:

**“All the political rights and liberties which people enjoy today, they do not owe to the good will of their governments, but to their own strength... Great mass movements and whole revolutions have been necessary to wrest them from the ruling classes, who would never have consented to them voluntarily. What is important is not that the governments have decided to concede certain rights to the people, but why they had to do this.**

**“If Anarcho-Syndicalism nevertheless rejects the participation in national parliaments, it is not because they have no sympathy with the political struggles in general, but because its adherents are of the opinion that this form of activity is the very weakest and most helpless form of the political struggle for the workers...**

**“It is a fact that when socialist labor parties have wanted to achieve some decisive political reforms they could not do it by parliamentary action, but were obliged to rely wholly on the economic fighting power of the workers. The political general strikes in Belgium and Sweden for the attainment of universal suffrage are proof of this. And in Russia, it was the general strike in 1905 that forced the Tsar to sign the new constitution. It was the recognition of this which impelled the Anarcho-Syndicalists to center their activity on the socialist education of the masses and the utilization of their**

**economic and social power. Their method is that of direct action in both the economic and political struggle of the time. By direct action they mean every method of the immediate struggle by the workers against economic and political oppression. Among these the outstanding are the strike in all its gradations, from the simple wage struggle to the general strike, organized boycott and all the other countless means which workers as producers have in their hands.”** (Pages 257–259)

In this connection, the reader has but to recall the direct action movements of workers and students in our own Southern states, as well as in South Africa, Korea, Turkey, Japan, Venezuela, Hungary, Poland and East Germany. The American labor movement turned to parliamentary action not because economic action is ineffective but because it surrendered its greatest weapon—the right to strike—to the employing class, the State and the union dictators. The labor movement is in deep crisis because the membership has been infected by the counter-revolutionary virus of class collaboration of which parliamentarism is but one form.

Instead of chasing the Labor Party illusion, all who seek a progressive revolutionary transformation of society should work to re-educate and inspire the labor movement with revolutionary principles, from which revolutionary strategy and tactics will logically flow.

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*Originally written in the United States some 25 years ago, this essay was as relevant then as it is today. At the time, Sam Dolgoff went by the pseudonym "Sam Weiner" in his writings.*

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