

James P Cannon and the fight for communism in the USA

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Bryan D Palmer, a Canadian based professor and writer on the history of the North American labour movement, has published the first volume of his James Cannon biography, ***James P Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left (1890-1974)*** Illinois, 2007. Simon Hardy reviews its lessons for today

James P Cannon was a tried and tested class fighter and a real working class leader, steeped in all the most radical traditions and experiences of the American working class. He was, successively, a member of Eugene V Debs' Socialist Party of America (1908), a militant of the International Workers of the World (IWW) (1911), an anti-war activist and supporter of the Russian Revolution (1917), a leading figure in the US Communist Party, a founder of the International Left Opposition and the Fourth International, and a leader until his retirement of the Socialist Workers Party of the USA. Palmer is therefore justified in saying, 'Cannon's history is the history of the origins of the American revolutionary left.'

This first volume deals with the years up to 1928 and Cannon's expulsion from the Communist International. The major questions of tactics and programme it covers are:

- ? What policy should revolutionaries pursue in the trade unions, to form new unions of the unskilled mass of workers, parallel to craft unions dominated by conservative bureaucracies (dual unionism) or to work within these unions to expand and amalgamate them into industrial unions?
- ? Must a working class political party be founded on the trade unions (a Labour Party), or can a revolutionary propaganda society of a few thousand simply grow into a party of the mass vanguard?
- ? Once a revolutionary party has been formed what should its tactics be towards reformist forces in the labour movement, to both maximise effectiveness in the daily class struggle whilst discrediting and replacing the reformist leaders
- ? What role, if any, should radicalised small farmers play in the labour movement, is a two-class party possible?
- ? What place should factions play inside a revolutionary party?
- ? What is the role of an International in the life of its national sections?

James P Cannon was born into a poor Irish immigrant family in a small town called Rosedale, just outside Kansas City. His father and mother, John Cannon and Ann Cannon, had a typical immigrant existence, leaving Ireland for Britain (Bolton), then crossing the Atlantic and moving further west to find work. His father John spent some time in the radical workers' movement, the Knights of Labour, when the family first moved to America, although he was much less active by the time James was born. Ann, a devout catholic, did all she could to bring up Jim in the faith, but ultimately this proved futile. Cannon left school at 12 and took various itinerant manual jobs. He spent several years living in slums, frequenting pool halls and gambling, falling into the aimless existence of many young Irish Americans. But suddenly, at the age of 17, he pulled himself together and went back to school, sharing classes with 12 and 13 year olds, as he

attempted to complete his education. Sadly, he lost this struggle when he was forced to leave school a year prior to his graduation. He once remarked: 'I think all my late life was to a certain extent shaped by this experience of going to high school, when I was old enough to be a graduate.' Palmer argues:

'These years established the foundation upon which Cannon would build in the future, willing to break out of the normal and the complacent, to endure ridicule and ostracism... to strike a path that promised much but whose material end was nowhere in sight.'

Cannon started off as a Christian Socialist. Palmer describes the 'definitive break' with this viewpoint as a lecture delivered in Kansas City by Arthur M Lewis on the theories of Darwin and Marx. This undermined Cannon's religious views, and exposed him for the first time to a thoroughgoing analysis of social revolutions. He later admitted he was 'never the same again'. Nonetheless, the factor that consolidated and deepened his new worldview was his participation in mass workers' struggles. Strikes were being fought right across the country as economic uncertainty and an unstable financial system drove bosses to attack the wages and conditions of their workers.

Trade union activity was severely restricted by both state and federal government, workers' leaders were arrested at will, usually on trumped up charges, and handed down heavy prison sentences. Defence campaigns would be organised demanding the release of the trade unionists. Mass workers' meetings were a regular feature of life in the mid west and working class districts of Minneapolis, New York and Chicago. Cannon was attracted to these campaigns and the struggle for justice that they represented, a real fight for the under dog, but especially for an underdog that was fighting back.

The Socialist Party and the Industrial Workers of the World

Out of these struggles two important organisations were born that would form the political leadership of the pre-war working class; the Socialist Party and the International Workers of the World (the 'Wobblies'). The Socialist Party was formed in 1901. Palmer describes it as a 'wide ranging amalgam of immigrant Marxists, native born radicals, and reform minded farmers and workers.' It was a typical party of the Second International (1889-1914) in that it contained both a reformist wing and a left wing around Eugene Debs (1855-1926). It attracted hundreds of thousands in the early 20th century. They included a mixture of progressive middle class professionals, small business people and the upper strata of the working class, often organised by the American Federation of Labour (AFL). In the years before the First World War, it had considerable electoral successes; electing two members of congress and over 70 mayors nation wide.

In 1956, Cannon described the reformist wing of the Socialist Party as 'droves of office-hunting careerists, ministers of the gospel, businessmen, lawyers and other professional people were attracted to the organisation which agreeably combined the promise of free and easy social progress with possible personal advantages for the ambitious. In large part they came, not to serve in the ranks but to take charge and run the show. Lawyers, professional writers and preachers became the party's most prominent spokesmen and candidates for office.' Cannon joined the SP in 1908 but effectively left when left winger Bill Haywood was drummed out of it in 1912, but the Socialist Party's vacillating and compromising attitude to the class struggle turned him in another direction. It is interesting that Cannon dated his conversion to revolutionary politics to 1911 when he first signed up for the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) or 'Wobblies'.

The IWW had been formed on June 27 1905. It was a revolutionary syndicalist union that organised along industrial lines and stressed 'direct action' not 'collective bargaining'. In reality, it tended to organise the previously unorganised, poorer, more insecure sections of the American working class. It was born amidst the turbulence of fierce class struggles. Its first conference was dominated by all the key figures of the pre-1914 workers' movement, both political and trade union. These included William 'Big Bill' Haywood

then secretary of the Western Federation of Miners, Debs of the Socialist Party, and the grey-haired diminutive figure of 'Mother' Jones, then seventy-five, a veteran of struggles from the times of the Knights of Labour. Other well-known delegates were Daniel De Leon (1852-1914) the pioneer of American Marxism and industrial unionism.

The 1890s had seen the rise to dominance on the trade union front of the AFL, largely made up of craft unions under Samuel Gompers (1850- 1924). The IWW represented both a political and organisational break with the AFL. Its founding declaration stated:

'The working class and the employing class have nothing in common. There can be no peace so long as hunger and want are found among millions of working people; and the few, who make up the employing class, have all the good things in life. Between these two classes a struggle must go on until the workers of the world organise as a class, take possession of the machinery of production, abolish the wage system, and live in harmony with the earth.'

By 1912, the organisation had around 50,000 members, concentrated in the Northwest, among dockworkers, agricultural workers in the central states, and in textile and mining areas. It was involved in over 150 strikes in the years before America's entry into the First World War, most famously the Lawrence textile strike, the 'Bread and Roses' strike by women workers (1912), the Paterson silk workers' strike (1913), and the strike of the Mesabi Range, Minnesota iron miners (1916). These strikes were characteristically violent since the police and company-hired thugs freely beat and shot strikers.

The IWW also organised what became known as the 'free speech movement'. In town after town, especially along the West Coast, the employers got the city authorities to ban IWW speakers. In 1909, the town of Spokane, Washington state, banned all outdoor meetings and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, a leading Wobbly organiser, was arrested for breaking this ordinance. The Wobblies responded by organising a stream of speakers to defy it; some 1200 people went to jail and four people were killed in the long campaign. Only in 1910 did the state authorities cave in.

The IWW employed simple but effective methods to communicate to workers. Using a sturdy wooden box, they would stand at the corner of a street in the middle of a workers' district and just start talking. A crowd would rapidly gather, though the police would often intervene violently, clubbing down audience and speakers alike. In Fresno, San Diego and other towns and cities, the battle was taken up. Wobblies were beaten, tortured, tarred-and-feathered by mobs paid for by local bosses. In a milder form of assault, bosses got Salvation Army bands to drown out Wobbly speakers. The 'land of the free' was not so free for ordinary workers, trade unionists and socialists. The backbone of the IWW was a layer of agitators known as Hobo Rebels, adventurous young men of no fixed abode, willing at a moment's notice to travel the country, usually by jumping trains, and start agitating wherever local workers were in struggle. Palmer quotes the writer John Graham Brooks who said in 1913:

'The IWW taps labor strata not only from lower than those of the trade union, but still lower than those from which socialism generally gets recruits. It appeals to the youth, to the most detached and irresponsible, to those free to follow a life of adventure.'

These young class fighters, significant numbers of them women, were involved in huge strikes and protests. They often fought pitched battles with the police and the armed 'company goons' employed by the capitalists. Government, state and town authorities tried to close the Wobblies down. Often soapbox agitators would be hauled down mid speech and bundled away by police; many faced lengthy prison sentences for 'sedition'. Wherever workers, mine workers, lumberjacks, steel workers or cotton pickers, fought back against their tyrannical bosses, the Wobblies seemed to appear from nowhere with agitators.

How could a young firebrand like Cannon not be attracted to such a vibrant, young movement?

From the Wobblies, Cannon learned the importance of mass agitation and of direct involvement in working class struggles. But he also learned from them the importance of education. Today, many middle class anarchists sneer at the idea of 'educating workers' believing that it is patronising or worthless. The Wobblies, along with most anarchists and socialists of their day, believed that education was absolutely crucial. Sunday school classes were held in Marxist economics, public meetings and socials would discuss radical theory and ideas. Inexpensive newspapers, journals and pamphlets were published and sold which aimed to educate workers in the militant class struggle. Cannon ended up in the offices of the IWW paper *Solidarity* and it was probably there that he began to appreciate the importance of the written word in disseminating socialist ideas.

In this period, the American working class was willing and able to struggle. The workers' movements took on a mass and popular character relatively quickly, and the vanguard sections of the working class were discussing how to bring about revolutionary change. As Palmer says, they were 'anticipating the possibility of revolution in an epoch when the actual mechanisms of producing a proletarian order were barely grasped.'⁵ However, whilst the reliance on the itinerant proletarian preacher as the backbone of the revolutionary movement, gave it enormous revolutionary élan, it also gave it a relatively episodic nature. The standard model of intervention went through similar stages; an initial strike outbreak, the IWW intervention, sometimes by hundreds of agitators, the strike takes on a mass character. Large-scale recruitment to the IWW follows, then comes violent state intervention and, finally, sometimes a defeat, or at least a forced return to work. Whilst this method was successful in generating support and even compromise agreements from the bosses, it was harder to build a long-term membership for the union. Little emphasis was placed on regular workplace work, and the failure to turn the industrial militants into political cadre and leaders was also a factor in the subsequent failure of the IWW strategy.

There was, however, a more fundamental political problem at the heart of the IWW's approach: syndicalism. Many years later, Cannon pointed out that in the years 1905-1917 the IWW 'existed primarily, not as a mass industrial union of workers fighting for limited economic demands, but as a revolutionary organisation proclaiming an all-out fight against the capitalist system.'⁶ He went on:

'As a union, the organisation led many strikes which swelled the membership momentarily. But after the strikes were over, whether won or lost, stable union organisation was not maintained. After every strike, the membership settled down again to the die-hard cadre united on principle. Not the least of the reasons for the eventual failure of the IWW, as an organisation, was its attempt to be both a union of all workers and a propaganda society of selected revolutionists, in essence a revolutionary party. Two different tasks and functions, which, at a certain stage of development, require separate and distinct organisations, were assumed by the IWW alone; and this duality hampered its effectiveness in both fields.'⁶

The outcome of the Wobblies' strategy was not only their creation of a powerful, if unstable, layer of class conscious militants many of whom, like Jim Cannon, were to contribute enormously to the post-war labour movement. Totally against their intentions, it also strengthened the hold of Gompers and the union bureaucracy over the AFL and, thus, blocked the road to the creation of an independent class party for US workers. Though the IWW certainly organised masses of hitherto unorganised workers, they were often lost either to non-unionism or to the sections of the AFL. Even before the war, and even within the ranks of those who considered themselves syndicalists, (in fact many Wobbly leaders rejected the term in favour of 'industrial unionist') some, most notably William Z Foster (1881-1961), were arguing for an alternative strategy.

Foster was another militant who left school at 10 and travelled the country doing an enormous range of

manual jobs, joining the Socialist Party in 1901 and being expelled from it as a leftist in 1909. He then joined the IWW, soon becoming a prominent leader. After meeting French syndicalists during an extended visit to Europe in 1910 and 1911, he developed a severe critique of the Wobblies' dual unionism, that is, their refusal to work within the AFL, where it has already established powerful unions. Foster argued for the French and British syndicalist tactic of 'boring from within,' entering existing unions and fighting to turn them into industrial unions, often by a process of amalgamation of the smaller craft unions. Defeated in the IWW, he formed his own short-lived organisation, the Syndicalist League of North America (SLNA).

Vicious wartime reaction and the Russian Revolution

In 1917, as soon as it entered the European war, the US government began a vicious campaign of discrediting and criminalising socialists and militant trade unionists. The Espionage Act of June 1917 laid down long sentences for anyone trying to interfere with recruitment. The IWW, which had renounced 'political action', discovered to its cost that the state would use political action (the law, both federal and state, and its many enforcement agencies) against them. The Socialist Party, too, was subjected to a lengthy and damaging repression when five of its leaders were arrested and Debs was sentenced to two years in jail. The IWW discovered that the bosses were also able to use direct action. Off-duty soldiers often smashed labour halls up and right wing thugs lynched leading activists from the fiercely anti-war Wobblies.

Another shock to the workers' movement was the Bisbee deportation of June 1917. A long, militant miners' strike in Bisbee Arizona, led to a totally illegal attack by a 2,000 strong 'army' consisting of police, 'deputies' and right wing thugs. Some 1,300 miners, plus Wobbly organisers and men with no connection to the struggle, were rounded up by heavily armed members of the 'Citizens Protective League' and marched to a park. They were asked to quit the strike but refused:

'At 11:00am, a train arrived, and 1,186 men were loaded aboard boxcars inches deep in manure. Also boarding were 186-armed guards; a machine gun was mounted on the top of the train. The train travelled from Bisbee to Columbus, New Mexico, where it was turned back because there were no accommodations for so many men. On its return trip, the train stopped at Hermanas, New Mexico, where the men were abandoned. A later train brought water and food rations, but the men were left without shelter until July 14th when U. S. troops arrived. The troops escorted the men to facilities in Columbus. Many were detained for several months.'

New inspiration for America's embattled revolutionaries came from the east. In Russia, on 7 November, the Bolshevik party led the Russian working class to power. Swiftly, they took Russia out of the war, recognised and encouraged the peasants to take the land and workers to take control of the factories. Cannon wrote: 'It took the first world war and the Russian Revolution to reveal the full scope of the incompleteness of the governing thoughts of the IWW.' At around the same time, Socialist party leader Morris Hillquit ran for the Mayoralty of New York on an anti war ticket and secured 145,000 votes (22% of the vote). Palmer quotes Cannon as saying this was the start of his 'evolution away from syndicalism and towards left wing socialism'.

At this point, Cannon began to work more closely with another Kansas City militant, Earl Browder. Browder was later to be general secretary of the Communist Party in the high period of Stalinism (1934-45). Since 1911, he had been a close collaborator of William Z Foster, but when Foster failed to oppose the United States' entry into the war in 1917 and actually helped sell war bonds he (temporarily) broke with him. From April 1919, Cannon and Browder began to work closely together, bringing out a fortnightly paper Workers' World, covering Kansas, Missouri and Nebraska. Cannon and Browder (who served several jail terms in this period) carried on a campaign against the Red scare and witch hunting of militants and in

support of the Russian Revolution.

Once the war was over, Foster restored his relations with the left. In an alliance with John Fitzpatrick and his strong trade union base in the Chicago Federation of Labour, he played a major part in the post-war labour upsurge, in the unionisation of the Chicago meat packers, and in the great steel strike of September 1919 ? January 1920. In this epic battle, some 400, 000 workers took part, most joining the union. Foster's alliance with Gompers and the AFL broke down when the latter gave little or no support to the steelworkers' union. Rank and file unionists and revolutionary militants like Mother Jones, rallied to the cause.

The strike eventually succumbed to lack of material resources, isolation and brutal repression. Federal and state authorities attacked the strikers, on behalf of the steel industry bosses with a ferocity that demonstrated once again that vaunted American democracy is, whenever workers fight for their basic rights, 'the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie'. Martial law was declared in Gary, Indiana, company vigilantes conducted a reign of terror and, in the first ten days alone, fourteen strikers were killed.

In 1921, Foster founded the Trade Union Education League (TUEL) as a fraction within the AFL, promoting industrial unionism by amalgamation and a general class struggle approach. It had its own paper and was invited by Browder to join a US delegation to the first congress of the Red International of Labour Unions (Profintern). Deeply impressed by what he saw in Russia, Foster joined the Workers' (Communist) Party on his return. He was to become Cannon's main ally within the Communist movement from 1923-28.

As the full significance of the Russian revolution began to seep back to the US, through journalists like John Reed (author of *Ten Days that Shook the World*) people initially flocked back into the Socialist Party, forming a new and definite left wing. Cannon and Browder decided to join them and succeeded in building a strong left wing in Kansas City. They joined not because of the reformism of the SP-leaders, but because it was the only political party that contained even a hint of the socialist ideals that had just propelled the Russian workers to power. The left wing began to use the language of Lenin; in February 1919, they published a pamphlet, which used his slogan 'turn the imperialist war into a civil war'.

At this point, the Socialist Party, with over 100,000 members, became more heterogeneous. Amongst the preachers, lawyers and small businessmen, fiery left wing radicals begin to operate, publishing their own newspapers and pamphlets. Some historians estimate that as many as two thirds of the SP's membership were sympathetic to the Russian Revolution at this time. Many of these were foreign immigrants who had picked up the ideas of socialism and anarchism in their original homelands. Others, like Cannon, were seasoned organisers and activists from the IWW or the AFL. Such militants were bound to clash with the socialists who controlled the upper levels of the SP.

Cannon wanted to win the majority of the SP's workers to the formation of an American communist party. In 1919, a national left wing conference was organised. One item dominated the agenda: how to 'develop American Bolshevism'? Or, in other words, how should the language, politics and method of the Bolsheviks be applied in the United States? Palmer captures well one of the overriding concerns of Cannon's life: how to make revolutionary communism comprehensible to the native born American working class, not just to the European immigrants and the intellectuals. One of the persistent conflicts of early communism in America was the struggle between the foreign language federations of New York and the 'native radicals' over what kind of party was needed.

How to build a US communist party?

Cannon organised the Kansas, Missouri and Nebraska regions of the Socialist Party on a 'thoroughly revolutionary basis... an early bastion of the proletarianised left wing.' Some of the most revolutionary

elements in the SP were the federations of European immigrants, still speaking only their home country's languages, publishing papers in Finnish, Russian, Lithuanian, Latvian, Serbo-Croat, German, Hungarian and Yiddish. As they saw it, they embodied the Bolshevism that had led to the revolution in Russia. The foreign language federations comprised over 50% of the SP's membership and owned thousands of dollars' worth of property, printing presses and meeting halls. However, many of these immigrant federations were totally un-integrated into the mainstream of US working class life, living in internalised communities. Cannon said that, nonetheless, they were invaluable from the outset 'because for the greater part they were earnest Communists and helped inculcate the doctrines of Bolshevism.'¹⁰ The left wing of the Socialist Party knew that a change was needed and that the reformist politics of the SP were incapable of leading the American workers to a revolution. The question was only whether to stay in the party and fight, or to split right away.

Some native-born Americans believed that the Russian language federations were the natural heirs of Bolshevism and proposed to follow them on their sectarian course. Cannon vehemently disagreed. He had already come to the view that any party in America would have to be rooted in the experience of the whole US working class, which was extremely heterogeneous in terms of militancy, ethnicity and political traditions. These debates were rushed, as a sense of urgency, spurred by the Russian revolution, forced some on the left to move quicker than others were prepared to go, and the right wing reformists of the party were not going to be played for fools either. They sidelined and defeated the left at the 1919 conference using their 'considerable knowledge of procedural obfuscation' and finally called in the police to clear out the conference hall. Many of the left were effectively expelled, splitting into numerous different factions and groupings.

Cannon joined the Communist Labour Party, led by John Reed and Benjamin Gitlow, which he believed had the best orientation to mass trade union struggles. A rival party, the Communist Party of America, led by Louis C. Fraina and Charles Ruthenberg, was heavily based on recruits from the foreign language federations of the old SP. In 1919, there was a huge wave of struggle, with more hours lost in strikes than in the entire succeeding six years. A citywide general strike broke out in Seattle and longshoremen from there refused to load munitions bound for the White Armies fighting the Bolsheviks in Russia. There were national strikes by coalminers and steelworkers. Socialist Party membership ballooned to 104,000. Soon, however, the state moved to crush the still young and divided revolutionary forces, communist, syndicalist and left socialist.

A series of police actions across the country hit militant strikers and sought to smash up the new communist organisations. Cannon soon found himself in prison. The US Attorney General, Alexander Palmer, had compiled a database of 150,000 'dangerous radicals'. In December 1919, his agents, led by a young J Edgar Hoover, forcibly placed 249 people of Russian origin, including well-known anarchist leaders such as Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, on a ship bound for the Soviet Union. In January 1920, they organised the largest mass arrests in U.S. history, the Palmer Raids. At least 10,000 individuals were deported, 4000 of them in a single night. Another 550 'foreign aliens' with no charge against them were summarily deported, too.

In this situation, all wings of the communist movement were suddenly forced underground and the IWW was dealt a shattering blow. Party leaders wrote under pseudonyms. Membership cards and charters were discarded and destroyed and communists were told not to divulge their affiliations 'unnecessarily.'¹¹ Various ultra left reactions to this repression predominated. Thus, when Eugene Debs, sentenced to ten years in jail and deprived of his civil rights in 1918 for opposing the war, was standing for president from his jail cell in 1920, the communists refused to support him. They called on workers not to join the AFL either and, when communists were forced to join it through force of circumstances, they talked about

?blowing it up? from within. In 1920, despite having only a handful of cadre available for public work and the entire labour movement reeling from the repression, they agitated for a general strike on Mayday. The early communist movement was dogged by such ultra left flights of fancy, by schematism and an ensuing isolation.

Towards a Communist Party in the USA

Once the state repression began to subside, however, and owing to pressure from the Communist International, the American communist movement united into a new organisation, the United Communist Party, in 1920. This formation would then go on, after further bitter internal struggles, to create a legal party through which it could operate called The Workers? Party. Cannon was the main proponent of the view that such a legal party was necessary but it took till May 1921 to achieve this. By then, it seems that as little as five percent of the members were native English-speakers. To Cannon?s dismay, the new party had plainly lost most of its roots in the native American working class. Nevertheless, with a legal party able to orient to the unions, Cannon felt this situation could be turned around. In his speech to its founding conference, he said, ?we are starting out to build a real movement of the fighting workers. We invite everybody to join us for an open struggle against capitalism. Those who don?t want to fight have our benediction, as they retire to the library.?

Cannon wanted to build a combat party of workers to lead the struggles. Many of the native radicals in the communist movement had complained about their permanent underground existence, and many thought that the state repression had eased off to the point where more legal work could be done. The creation of the Workers? Party caused some of the ?undergroundists? to break off, carrying on their political lives well away from the public arena of the class struggle.¹² Some stayed and fought, accusing Cannon and the others of liquidationism.¹³ Their entrenched sectarian attitude would have to be resolved at the 1922 Communist International?s Fourth Congress in Moscow. There, Cannon and others, succeeded in winning over influential Russian leaders like Trotsky. Through debate and discussion they convinced them that the new legal party was the correct approach to take.

The Comintern at the time was developing its policy of united front work, trying to find all possible routes to the mass of working class and their struggles. In the US, this meant winning them away from the populist wings of the Republican and Democratic parties. Having decisively won the debate on legality, Cannon and the others came back to the USA to find a new political leader had risen to prominence, John Pepper, a Hungarian communist whose real name was József Pogány. He had associated himself with Charles Ruthenberg, the senior leader. Rallying a number of younger communist leaders, like Jay Lovestone, around him, Pepper presented himself as ?the Comintern?s man in America?, and claimed a close connection to Bolshevism through his involvement in the brief Hungarian Soviet republic of 1919, led by Béla Kun. Pepper?s methods became anathema to Cannon, and they would soon be in a headlong confrontation over how to build a workers? party.

A Labour or a Farmer-Labour Party?

The bleak years after the Red Scare and the Palmer Raids ended and things were more favourable to the left by 1923. A strong recovery of the economy, beginning in 1921, brought unemployed workers back into the factories. This gave new impetus to a movement that had begun in 1918. In that year, John Fitzpatrick and Edward Nockels, of the Chicago Federation of Labor, had headed moves to create a Labour Party. It spread through Illinois, into Minnesota, Michigan, Indiana, South Dakota and to New York. However, in the years of the repression and the underground communist parties, the latter had little sympathy with the idea of a reformist party, similar to British Labour.

However, in 1921, Lenin advised the British Communists to seek affiliation to the British Labour Party and

the Communist International, recoiling from an abortive ultra leftist uprising in Germany, which had revealed its German section's isolation from the majority of the working class, began to elaborate the tactics known as the united front. At the Communist International's Third Congress, in July 1921, at a December meeting of its International Executive Committee and at its Fourth Congress in summer 1922, these tactics were spelled out.

They required an approach to the reformist parties and leaders of the unions to undertake actions in defence of workers' wages, conditions and democratic rights so as to maximise the forces mobilised and in the process demonstrate the superiority of communist tactics and leadership. The united front approach could stretch from such purely defensive struggles to the question of installing various forms of a workers' government. These included critical support for governments of the reformist parties, like the Labour Party in Britain, to Communist participation with left reformists in a government, which would arm the workers and seize key sectors of the economy, measures transitional to the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Obviously, such united front tactics and their method, absolute political independence and the right and duty of the Communists to criticise their reformist partners when they hesitated or tried to betray the struggle, were a revelation to US communists. Frederick Engels in the 1880s, Karl Kautsky in the early 1900s, later supported by Lenin, had argued for the idea that in countries like Britain and the US, where Marxists had been unable to build a mass workers' party, getting the unions to play the major role in founding an independent class party, a 'labour party', was the way forward. Their assumption was that, even if such a party was founded on an inadequate reformist basis, its politics could be developed and transformed into revolutionary ones, if Marxists fought inside it for this goal. They condemned those Marxists, like Hyndman and the SDF in England or De Leon and the SLP in America, who stood aside from this task, as sectarians who expected the workers to come to them, like pupils to a school.

Now, in 1922-3, the situation seemed once again favourable to a mass labour party coming into existence in the USA. The question was would the Workers' Party be able to apply united front tactics in both a flexible and a principled way so as to increase the influence of Marxism. Given that John Fitzpatrick, at the centre of the labour party movement, was an old ally of Foster, indeed still worked closely with him and with Cannon, too, the opportunity was certainly there.

Alongside the labour party movement, there were others calling for a 'third party' to break the stranglehold of the Republicans and Democrats. They appealed for a new populist party that could draw in the progressive wings of the two capitalist parties.

The Workers' Party could have been an important factor in this situation, but with membership only in the thousands, it could not hope to found a labour party on its own. It wisely sought an alliance with John Fitzpatrick, who was working alongside the Foster-led Trade Union Education League. It was at this moment that the influence of Pepper proved disastrous. The Workers' Party sought to draw in the Minnesota Farmer-Labor party. Its party platform called for state protection for small farmers and union members, government ownership of some industries, and a social security system. It was, in short, a populist party, which stood on a programme that defended small property owners along with limited social reforms, rather than standing for the emancipation of the working class.

There is no doubt that the 'labour party tactic' offered the communists a real opportunity to draw in a sizeable force of militant reformist workers, winning them to political class independence as a first step and then to a full communist programme. But the crux of the matter was whether the labour party could be founded on a proletarian basis or did it have to be a two-class party? Pepper developed a theory that the American farmers were, at the moment, the most revolutionary force in the country and that a two-class party had to be built. Of course, the temptation to have a 'two-class' party, especially in the mid west, was

very great. In 1920, agricultural prices collapsed and stayed low throughout the decade. Large numbers of small farmers faced ruin and were dramatically radicalised. A new wave of populism swept the country.

The reformist forces in the labour party movement saw no problem in including the farmers and their local and national bodies were soon all designated 'Farmer-Labor' parties, without any substantive change of programme. Pepper's strategy was doubly disastrous, however. First, he conceded the argument on the party's class character by accepting the Farmer-Labor Party name and reformist programme. Then he developed a plan to assure The Workers' Party control of it by packing the conference. Fitzpatrick and his allies were certainly trying to keep the communists in the background of the process, fearful that Gompers would whip up a red scare to keep most AFL affiliates away from the new party. However, Pepper, having conceded the name and a dual class character and reformist programme to Fitzpatrick, was determined to grab a tight organisational hold on it. The Workers' Party had only been allowed a total of 10 delegates, an unfairly small proportion beyond doubt, but the WP Central Executive Committee chose not to fight it politically but by surreptitiously sending around 190 delegates anyway, via a series of front organisations. Cannon wrote a letter to the CEC calling on them to change this ruinous policy:

'We think the chief significance of this conference consists in the possibility of laying there the basis for the organised drive towards a labor party and our party cooperating in it as an integral unit from the start. The thing we want is the launching of an organisation campaign in the trade unions towards that centre which is created by that conference (...) If we flood the conference with Workers Party delegates, we simply lay the conference open to such a successful attack (by Gompers, ed.) and thereby defeat ourselves by defeating the conference; and it will be no consolation to us that we had a lot of strength at the conference and got a lot of newspaper publicity.'¹⁴

Cannon's approach was clearly much more principled and realistic than that of Pepper and his fears were totally justified. The Workers' Party delegates turned up with a nearly one third of the delegates and converted the conference into a WP dominated farce. It declared a Federated Farmer Labor Party, on the old Farmer Labor Party programme, ignoring the appeals of the reformist union leaders that it was too soon to do this. Fitzpatrick then walked out, cursing the communists, and made sure they suffered for it. The next year would be hell for known communists in the trade unions; they were excluded, marginalised, and even physically intimidated. So the Federated Farmer Labour Party was stillborn. Palmer describes it as 'an incestuous creation' of the communists and their closest supporters. The tragedy was that Pepper and the majority of the Workers' Party leadership shipwrecked for many years the possibilities of creating a labour party on the rocks of sheer adventurism. Undeterred, Pepper developed an even more unprincipled scheme; to use the front organisation of the FFLP to support an openly bourgeois candidate in the 1924 Presidential election, the maverick populist Wisconsin senator, Robert La Follette.

Subsequent developments revealed that Cannon himself lack any clarity over the labour party tactic at this time. He, like all sides in the party, assumed that it would have to be a reformist party first. Indeed, this issue was not satisfactorily solved till 1938 when Cannon, along with Trotsky, developed the idea of fighting for a transitional anticapitalist programme as the basis for a Labour Party. Then it became clear that one could, at one and the same time, fight alongside reformist trade unionists, who wanted an independent class party supported by their unions, and fight against reformist leaders to win their rank and file to a whole series of transitional demands, thus creating not an obstacle to a mass revolutionary party but a bridge to it. But all this was still fifteen years away. What was essential was the issue of a working class party independent of all bourgeois forces, and on this neither Cannon-Foster nor Pepper - Ruthenberg had the slightest clarity.

Both Pepper and Cannon, for different reasons, now saw support for La Follette as a means of vindicating

their respective orientations. Cannon saw it as a means of rebuilding the party's bridges, severed by the clash with Fitzpatrick, with the populist progressives in the unions who tended to support La Follette. By supporting La Follette, he argued, the FFLP could fuse with these forces. Pepper, on the other hand, saw it as a means of reaching the revolutionary farmers and turning his back on the labour aristocratic AFL trade unionists. La Follette was to play the role of Kerensky in a 'Third American Revolution' (a bourgeois democratic one), which would rapidly clear the way for a fourth, proletarian one. He even began to write about 'the La Follette Revolution'.

The position was strikingly similar to the Russian Mensheviks' arguments prior to 1917 and such a position would later also be taken up by Stalin and his supporters in the Communist International as it degenerated by misusing the old Bolshevik slogan from 1905 of the 'democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry.' Later, this was converted into the fully reformist and counterrevolutionary slogan of the people's front. The La Follette escapade was an early essay in class collaborationist politics. As such it received a withering critique from Trotsky.

'But truly amazing is the position of certain leaders of the American Communist Party who propose to summon the party to vote for La Follette, hoping in this way to secure for the Communists influence over the farmers. (...) For a young and weak Communist Party, lacking in revolutionary temper, to play the role of solicitor and gatherer of 'progressive voters' for the Republican Senator La Follette is to head toward the political dissolution of the party in the petty bourgeoisie. After all opportunism presents itself not only in the moods of gradualism but also in political impatience: it frequently seeks to reap where it has not sown, to realize successes which do not correspond to its influence.¹⁵

Trotsky denounced-

'The inspirers of this monstrous opportunism, who are thoroughly imbued with skepticism about the American proletariat and are impatiently seeking to transfer the party's centre of gravity into a farmer milieu... To think that Bolshevism consists of this is to understand nothing about Bolshevism.'

It was only the Comintern's intervention at the time that stopped Pepper from carrying out the policy. The Comintern's opposition forced the Communists to break completely with all sections of the Farmer-Labor movement, wind up the FFLP and 'turn left'. Grigory Zinoviev, the chairman of the International, prompted the CP to 'rectify' its error by denouncing La Follette as a fascist, a cure at least as bad as the disease.

The whole experiment revealed a fundamental weakness in the labour party tactic as conceived by the American Communists. From a sectarian abstention from the real labour party movement in 1919, the Communists eventually arrived at a position that regarded the formation of a dual class party, farmers and workers, on a reformist-populist programme, as the object of the tactic. This necessarily led them to accept the role of friendly midwives to it, avoiding all political criticism of their reformist partners' politics. Yet, when faced with losing organisational control, they resorted to 'taking it over' by behind the scenes manoeuvres.¹⁶ They became not midwives but backstreet abortionists. In so doing, they not only undid much of the previous two years' valuable trade union work but put back for nearly a decade and a half the opportunity to break substantial sectors of the US workers from the political domination of the bourgeois parties. It is scarcely surprising, then, that 1923-4 was a turning point.

Factional warfare

Cannon, despite the fact that he had not opposed the Farmer-Labor class bloc, or the idea that, for an entire stage, it should have a reformist programme, did realise clearly enough the total disaster of packing the conference and the consequent split with Fitzpatrick. In short, he realised the disastrous effect it had on the party's trade union work. He therefore set out to challenge and break Pepper's malign hold over the leadership. To do this, he formed a block with Foster who, as the WP's key trade union leader, also

rapidly realised the disaster of the breach with Fitzpatrick. It quite simply undid two years' work of the TUEL in assembling a strong rank and file periphery and powerful left allies in the AFL, opening the communists to a ferocious witch hunt in the unions.

Thus Cannon and Foster created an alliance to defeat Pepper, Ruthenberg and Jay Lovestone. Thanks to Cannon's organising skills and a ruthless assembling of all Pepper's enemies on both right and left of the party, he succeeded. The deciding factor was a group of lefts from the foreign language federations led by Ludwig Lore. Thus, at the third convention of the Workers' Party, held between 30 December 1923 and 2 January 1924, the Pepper-Lovestone leadership was put into a minority and lost control of the leading committees. The new leadership (Foster-Cannon-Lore) had a majority of 8-5 on the Central Executive Committee and 4-3 on the political bureau. Cannon's supporters, Martin Abern and Max Shachtman, took control of the Young Workers' League and its paper *The Young Worker*.

But Cannon's victory was costly and, as it turned out, short-lived. He would appeal again to the Comintern for advice and guidance, unaware of the growing bureaucratisation of the International and oblivious to the serious opportunist and ultra-left zigzags by Zinoviev and the leadership in the years 1923-6 that Trotsky and the Left Opposition were fighting. In particular, he was unaware, because it was never published in English, of Trotsky's criticism of the Workers' Party's position, as developed by Pepper, on the Farmer-Labor Party and *La Follette*.

Cannon and Foster travelled to Moscow to attend the fifth enlarged plenum of the International Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI). This took place between 21 March and 6 April 1925. The ECCI had 43 full, and 23 candidate, members, but it was 'enlarged' with extra delegates from the sections so that there were 77 delegates with decisive, and 53 delegates with consultative, votes, a miniature congress. The problems of the US section were a major item, with a special commission (subcommittee) appointed to discuss this. The Russian leaders, including Zinoviev, the International's secretary, and Nicolai Bukharin were participants.

'I soon got the chilling impression that the position of our faction was far weaker in Moscow than at home. Bukharin was particularly outspoken in favor of the Ruthenberg faction and acted like a factional partisan,,, Zinoviev appeared to be more friendly and impartial. I had the impression he wanted to correct our position on the labor party question without upsetting our majority, to restrain the majority from any suppression of the minority and in general to slow down the faction struggle. I remember him saying to Foster at the end of one of our talks 'Frieden ist besser' (peace is better). As I remember we did not see Stalin and did not know that he was becoming the real power behind the scenes.'¹⁷

When Zinoviev launched the 'Bolshevisation drive' in 1924, aimed at weakening opposition by lowering the cadre level and democratic culture of the communist parties, Cannon supported it, believing it to be an opportunity to proletarianise the party and fight the opportunists.

But, at the Fourth Convention, held in Chicago in August 1925, despite winning a two-thirds majority of votes (40-21) the Foster-Cannon leadership were effectively deprived of the leadership by the intervention of the Comintern representative S I Gusev. The Comintern Cable (telegram) read out only on the eighth day of the congress was devastating for Foster and Cannon. It stated 'The Ruthenberg group is more loyal to decisions of the Communist International and stands closer to its views' and went on to demand that the majority, on pain of expulsion, accept a parity situation with the Ruthenberg-Lovestone minority. Ruthenberg must continue as secretary of the party and in the parity CEC the Comintern's representative would have the casting vote. The majority were fatally divided by this move. Foster raged and sought to offer resistance to Gusev's decree or appeal to a full meeting of the International Executive of the Comintern (it was plain the Russian had written the telegram, got the Moscow secretariat's approval and

then received it back as a Comintern instruction).

But Cannon, shattered as he was by the event, counselled complete and total submission to the International. This led to a bitter split between the Cannonites, led by Jim and William Dunne, and the Fosterites.

Why did Cannon, the supposed inveterate faction fighter, succumb to his enemies so totally? His answer, given thirty years later, was his devotion to the International and still intact respect for, and belief in, the objectivity of its leaders, the people who had made the Russian Revolution.

?I was then a convinced Cominternist. I had faith in the wisdom and also the fairness of the Russian leaders. I thought they had made a mistake through false information and that the mistake could later be rectified. I did not even suspect that this monstrous violation of the democratic rights of our party was one of the moves in the Moscow chess game in which our party, like all other parties in the Comintern, was to be a mere pawn. I thought Foster?s attitude was disloyal.?18

After the Fourth Convention, at the first meeting of the CEC, the full scale of Gusev?s treachery became clear. He announced that, as the Comintern cable had proclaimed that the Ruthenberg faction was closest to the view of the Comintern, he would cast his vote with them to ensure them a majority on the key committees and positions. Thus the ?parity formula? that had convinced Cannon that all was not lost turned out to be a trap. Yet, as he recalled,

?If I admit that I went along with this treacherous double play and still refused to have any part in any revolt against the Comintern, it is not to claim credit for myself. I write down this distasteful recollection now simply to show that devotion to the Comintern, which had originally been one of the greatest merits of the pioneer communists was being turned into a sickness which called for a radical cure.?19

Cannon?s submission to the Comintern, his split with Foster that made his grouping the smallest of the main factions, goes against the charge, often repeated, that Cannon was an unprincipled factionalist. By 1925, he was stressing the need to unite the leading communists into a working whole, even suggesting a ?faction against factionalism?, reminiscent of Trotsky?s 1903-1916 conciliators, and like them, a doomed attempt. Palmer points out that, wherever possible, Cannon sought to establish a collective leadership. He defends Cannon against the allegations of ?some British Trotskyists,? including the late Al Richardson, that Cannon was basically a Zinovievite all along, offering remarks made by Cannon about the problems of Zinoviev?s approach and the complexities of the issues.²⁰ In conclusion, Palmer quotes from people like CLR James who spoke highly of the Cannon of the 1930s and 1940s as one who repeatedly made attempts to prevent unnecessary persecution of minorities.

For Cannon, the a cure for demoralising factionalism in the Workers? Party under Ruthenberg and Jay Lovestone, was to plunge once more into agitation in the working class and trade union milieu. Palmer is of the opinion that ?the International Labour Defence (ILD) mobilisations of the 1920s gave Jim Cannon a respite from the factional intrigues..?21

This initiative had been thought up by Cannon and the former Wobbly leader, Bill Haywood, in Moscow, where the latter was effectively exiled and where, in 1928, he was to die.

Cannon had acquired the skills for this in the IWW?s campaigns in defence of their militants and was able to put them to good use in the International Labor Defence (ILD) launched in June 1925. He used his old contacts from pre-war days. Indeed, Palmer argues that, although Cannon was accused by factional opponents of ?packing the ILD with his supporters?, he was urged to take the leadership of it by non party

Wobblies, who valued his experience and integrity as a class fighter. The new mass campaign organised huge demonstrations, made popular the plight of workers and trade unionists on death row or serving long stretches in prison and rallied US support for the struggles going on abroad. It published regular papers and magazines and propelled the Workers' Party into a much more important position in the US labour movement.

The ILD had 20,000 individual members by 1926, plus around 75,000 members in affiliated organisations. It was a real lifeline for the Workers' Party at this time, when less than one third of members were in trade unions. It mounted vigorous campaigns in defence of prisoners like the anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti.

Cannon becomes a Trotskyist

Palmer's account reveals clearly enough that Cannon was no consistent critic of, let alone rebel against, the Comintern's line from 1923-1928. It confirms that Cannon, like many American Communists retained a respect for Trotsky, recognising his leading role, next to Lenin, in the October Revolution. For this reason, though Cannon did not align himself with the Left Opposition and indeed voted for resolutions on the CEC and in conventions that backed the Russian party leadership against them, he avoided all public statements on the issue. Indeed, his overall viewpoint remained resolutely subordinated to what he thought was best for the American party, especially what would root it most successfully in the industrial working class, and steadfast in his loyalty to the Comintern, even when it treated him unjustly. On this basis, he rallied around him a group of worker militants and a number of young intellectuals like Max Shachtman and Martin Abern who were active in the youth work and the party publications. To this must be added a group of mid-west stalwarts of the Cannon faction like Vincent Dunne.

Cannon later recorded that a major event for him was when asked about the expulsion from the Comintern of Trotsky and Zinoviev, 'Who am I to condemn the leaders of the Russian Revolution?' He also made clear his distaste for Stalin in private conversations beyond his own supporters, 'He makes shit out of leaders and leaders out of shit.'

The factional warfare eventually took its toll on Cannon, despite his ILD work he records his own increasing disillusion with his life as a party functionary in an organisation of permanent factionalism. He also records the shock that the expulsion of Zinoviev and Trotsky in December 1927 had on him. This seemed to him to sever the links to the October Revolution, though his knowledge of the political content of the struggles of the Left and United Oppositions was still only sketchy.

'The foot-loose Wobbly rebel that I used to be had imperceptibly begun to fit comfortably into a swivel chair, protecting himself in his seat by small manoeuvres and evasions, and even permitting himself a certain conceit about his adroit accommodation to this shabby game. I saw myself for the first time as another person, as a revolutionist who was on the road to becoming a bureaucrat. The image was hideous, and I turned away from it in disgust.'

In 1928, Cannon was amongst the 29 voting delegates who travelled once again to Moscow for the Sixth Congress of the Comintern that from 17 July to 1 September. At this congress, the Stalinist forces were already in the ascendant. Bukharin was still the president of the Comintern but many knew that his position was precarious. There was what has been called a 'corridor congress' underway, whereby Stalin's supporters in the Russian party let certain key foreign delegates know that a major left turn was coming in Russia and that this would mean the downfall of Bukharin and his main supporters like Alexei Rykov and Mihhail Tomsy. The origins lay in the so-called grain strike of the rich peasants or kulaks and the empirical turn by Stalin to collectivisation and industrialisation. Stalin was in fact stealing, albeit in a grossly bureaucratic and adventurist form, the economic platform of the Left Opposition, but without the political programme of a restored soviet, trade union and inner party democracy.

Bukharin, totally identified with the previous 'snail's pace' industrialisation and collectivisation, resisted Stalin's turn. It was now his turn to feel the crushing power of the bureaucratic apparatus the General Secretary had assembled. Already his supporters in the state apparatus were being ousted from their posts. In April 1929, Stalin ousted Bukharin himself from the Comintern. The Sixth Congress was to be Bukharin's swan song. He himself tried to turn left, to deflect the criticism that he was a Rightist, so that one theme of the congress was the opening of a so-called Third Period of de-stabilisation and renewed revolutionary upheavals. This was to be marked by a downplaying of the united front tactics and then their effective abandonment. Clearly Bukharin's protégés, like the Workers' Party leader Jay Lovestone, were in mortal danger. Former Fosterites like Earl Browder were in line for promotion.

The Congress itself was a horror for all its participants. Despite the interminably long speeches, there was denunciation but no debate in the plenary sessions. Stalin supporters like Palmiro Togliatti said it made one 'feel like hanging oneself.' Even an utterly loyal hack like Maurice Thorez reported that the congress was marked by 'uneasiness, discontent, scepticism' amongst the delegates in private.

The struggle against Trotskyism was still the number one order of the day. On this, Cannon remained silent, despite pleas from his supporter Dunne to speak out 'for the sake of the faction'. He absented himself from the session that finally voted to reject Trotsky's appeal against his expulsion.

Cannon records that in the first days he was embroiled in the usual round of American caucus meetings and factionalising. But then something remarkable happened. The Congress was due to adopt a programme for the Comintern. The debate on this had been going on since the Fourth Congress in 1923. Bukharin's final draft was up for debate and final agreement; few could have doubted that it would be approved overwhelmingly. Cannon was appointed to the programme commission. When he and his close colleague, Maurice Spector, from the Canadian CP, opened their official pack of documents, to their astonishment they found inside a lengthy document by Trotsky, translated into English, which subjected Bukharin's draft to a devastating critique. More than this, it contained a critical balance sheet of the Comintern's policies since the Fourth Congress including Trotsky's attack on the Pepper-initiated Farmer-Labor tactic and the La Follette debacle in 1923-4.

Reading this document had a politically transforming effect on Cannon. It explained clearly the events of the last five years as a process of systematic political degeneration, going back to the adoption of 'socialism in one country' and involving a systematic bureaucratisation of the Russian workers' state and then the other sections of the Comintern. It involved catastrophic and unnecessary defeats like the Shanghai massacre of the Chinese Communists in 1927. Cannon suddenly lost all interest in the boring ritual of the Congress session or the whisperings in the corridors. He met secretly with Maurice Spector to discuss Trotsky's document. They agreed that Trotsky was right and, after some hesitation, decided that it would be completely useless to make any public declaration at the congress. They had to get Trotsky's invaluable document back to America, indeed to as many countries as possible, and then launch a fight within the Comintern's member parties. A spare copy was, in fact, smuggled out by them, stuffed into a teddy bear belonging to the child of a sympathetic delegate.

Cannon's sudden absence from much of the proceedings, his sounding out of other delegates, had not gone unnoticed and on his return he was soon summoned before the party leadership. With Martin Abern and Max Shachtman he faced a ten day interrogation by the American leadership after which they came out as Trotskyists with a mimeographed circular to all Workers' Party (now renamed Communist Party) members. On 25 October, they were expelled from the party. Nevertheless, they were able to assemble around 100 followers and bring out a newspaper; American Trotskyism was born, small, isolated but fighting.

The Communist League (Opposition) was the first name of the Communist League of America, the first American organisation affiliated with the International Left Opposition associated with Leon Trotsky. The group emerged from a set of expulsions of supporters of the Russian Left Opposition from the ranks of the American Party, first and foremost the expulsions of Workers (Communist) Party CEC members James P. Cannon and Martin Abern and CEC Alternate Max Shachtman at the meeting of the Political Committee of October 25, 1928. Two days later, Cannon, Abern, and Shachtman issued a 19 point mimeographed reply, circulated to as many party members as they could reach. The first issue of the group's new weekly newspaper, *The Militant*, came out on 15 November, 1928.

Palmer gives an account of the unexpected and unprecedented first verbal harassment as counterrevolutionaries and then physical attacks carried out on the Trotskyists, including on women members trying to sell the *Militant*. They responded by mobilising a united front of workers' defence guards, receiving help in this from IWW, AFL and Socialist Party lefts.

Although the small, organised forces of Trotskyism survived a painful birth, the future must have looked bleak, indeed. Cannon, for the first time in his political life, was outside a party or a union, with scarcely any finances behind him. He and the other two expelled members were sarcastically described as 'three generals without an army.' Cannon would have to set out now to rebuild an army of fighters for communism in the USA.

Palmer concludes this volume as follows:

'Cannon's major contribution... was the fusion of theory and practise that is the touchstone of revolutionary endeavour. It jelled not so much on the page of any text as in the organisation of a revolutionary working class party.'²⁴

Indeed, Cannon's experiences as a revolutionary are thoroughly interwoven with the experiences of the American revolutionary workers; from syndicalism and left-wing socialism through to Bolshevism, and then to a struggle against Stalinism as it took hold of the world communist movement.

Palmer's claim that this twenty-year period represented an 'age of innocence' for the US labour movement, whilst understandable in comparison with the filthy actions of US Stalinism in the decade to come, ignores the bureaucratic skulduggery of Gompers and the AFL bureaucrats and the right wing in the Socialist Party. Revolutionaries had better not be innocents when facing the trade union, Social Democratic or Stalinist bureaucracy. Jim Cannon was certainly no innocent. It might be better to say that the period Palmer describes was, in one important sense, the heroic age of US labour. It was one in which revolutionaries succeeded for an extended period in playing a leading role in the mass struggles of American workers, breaking through the pro-capitalist ideology with which for long periods the ruling millionaires have been able to fog the consciousness of US workers. This period must be an inspiration to those fighting today to restore socialism and militant trade unionism to its rightful pace in the life of the American workers. It has been done before and will be done again. At a time when US finance capital is trembling on its foundations, young workers should reach out to the writings of Jim Cannon and to this biography for inspiration.

Palmer's book is a sympathetic source for anyone who wants to understand the fight that took place in the heart of world imperialism to establish a principled revolutionary party. We look forward to the publication of the second volume.

Those who wish to read more should begin with Cannon's own *History of American Trotskyism*, his *First Ten Years of American Communism* and the *Selected Writings and Speeches of James P Cannon 1920-1928* issued by Prometheus Research Library. Theodor Draper's *American Communism and Soviet*

Russia (1960) also remains an invaluable source on the period.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Bryan D Palmer, 2007, James P Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left (1890-1974), Illinois, p.16
- 2 James Cannon 1956, E.V. Debbs
- 3 ?Preamble to the IWW Constitution?, <http://www.iww.org/culture/official/preamble.shtml> ^[1]
- 4 Palmer 2007, p.55
- 5 Palmer 2007, pp.85 -86.
- 6 Cannon, Summer 1955, ?The IWW?, Fourth International
- 7 <http://www.library.arizona.edu/exhibits/bisbee/history/overview.html> ^[2]
- 8 Palmer, 2007, p.98
- 9 Palmer, 2007, p.95
- 10 Cannon ?Early days of American Communism? (Chapter 1 History of American Trotskyism)
- 11 Palmer 2007, p.116
- 12 For more on this see Cannon?s Early days of American Communism and the online archive of CPUSA documents at Marxists.org is invaluable <http://www.marxists.org/history/usa/eam/index.html> ^[3], plus note 14 below.
- 13 A term used by Lenin referring to those who wanted to dissolve the illegal party into a legal and therefore, under Tsarism, a non-revolutionary labour party or workers congress.
- 14 Cannon, 1972, James P Cannon and the Early Years of American Communism; Selected writings and speeches, NY Prometheus Research Library, p.125
- 15 Trotsky, 1945 (1924), The First Five Years of the Communist International, Volume 1, ?Introduction?, p.13 NY 1945
- 16 The whole episode has startling similarities to the Socialist Workers Party initiated Respect debacle; the far left organisation formed Respect as a populist electoral alliance with representatives of the Muslim community only for it later collapse under the weight of these class contradictions with the SWP similarly accused of maintaining a bureaucratic stranglehold on the organisation. See ?Respect Splits: Socialist Workers Party in crisis? www.fifthinternational.org ^[4] or, for a critique of the method behind the Respect project see Luke Cooper, 2005, ?The road to Respect: the SWP?s march to the right?, in Fifth International, vol. 1, no. 3, also on www.fifthinternational.org ^[4]
- 17 Cannon, 1973, The First Ten Years of American Communism NY, p.132
- 18 ibid
- 19 ibid
- 20 Palmer, 2007, p.358
- 21 ibid, p.285
- 22 Cannon, 1972, James P Cannon and the Early Years of American Communism, NY, Cannon Prometheus Research Library, p61
- 23 Palmer, 2007, p 325
- 24 Palmer, 2007, p.361

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Links:

- [1] <http://www.iww.org/culture/official/preamble.shtml>
- [2] <http://www.library.arizona.edu/exhibits/bisbee/history/overview.html>
- [3] <http://www.marxists.org/history/usa/eam/index.html>
- [4] <http://www.fifthinternational.org>