

ON THE

COMMUNIST PARTY

by ROBERT THOMPSON



Robert Thompson

FOUR weeks after he was released from prison, Bob Thompson made the following speech at a Welcome-Back Mass Rally at the Carnegie Music Hall in New York City.

Issued as a public service by the Labor Committee,
Communist Party, New York State, 23 W. 26 St. NYC

On the Communist Party: Some Problems and Perspectives

By BOB THOMPSON

YOU KNOW PRISON LIFE develops its own special vocabulary. Everything that exists outside the 30 ft. high walls, without any distinctions or gradations, is the free world. Let me just this once be very loose in my vocabulary and say that it is good to be back in this free world—good to be back amongst you, my very dear friends and comrades.

It is an especially warm and nice thing to be able to greet many of my old friends who have been scat-

tered about federal prisons these past several years. I have only one sharp regret—that Henry Winston, Gil Green and Irving Potash are not with us here tonight. I know that each of you shares my determination that this shall be changed.

* * *

There are many fresh breezes in our land. I thought the one that blew in from Chicago this past weekend—I am referring to the stories in the press about the won-

derful independence and spirit of those young people who are putting over the World Youth Festival there—is typical of these new and better-for-our-country winds.

I am sure that you who have been living in this fresh atmosphere of a roll-back of the cold-war hysteria, have learned much these past few years. You have been grappling with new problems—trying to find a way forward in new situations and no enterprise could be more rich and more rewarding than that.

Now, as all of you know, prison is a poor place to absorb fresh atmosphere. I tell all of you quite frankly, I haven't been out among you long enough to absorb much that is fresh in the atmosphere, much that is new in the problems you have been grappling with, much that is new in the perspective unfolding before the working class of our country. But of course I do have certain views—certain deeply held convictions. I want to speak briefly of some of these to you here tonight.

I want to speak to you of them in an atmosphere which it seems to me is developing among Left and socialist-minded people—an atmosphere I consider most helpful—an atmosphere in which ideas and policies can be debated sharply on their merits with a minimum of frozen attitudes and an absence of venom and rancor.

To my many friends—and though I consider them deeply mistaken I still regard them as friends—who

have dropped away from the Communist Party in this last period, I especially ask that you help in cultivating this atmosphere permitting of friendly debate and discussion.

In the days since coming out of prison, I have been greatly inspired by many things, and deeply disturbed by a number of other things.

It is of course inspiring to emerge from prison at a time when our country is emerging out of, not entering into, a decade of rampant cold war hysteria and severe political repression.

A country in which the working class is emerging out of this period, not as a defeated class, but on the contrary, as a class which has become organizationally more united, and in this respect, more powerful.

A country in which there is boiling up such a powerful Negro people's movement with such strong allies in the ranks of labor and elsewhere that for the first time since the Reconstruction days, the democratic transformation of the South is being placed on the order of the day.

A country which still has a Communist Party, true, a party that has been knocked, buffeted and torn, but a party nevertheless which at its 16th National Convention retained the potential of yet playing on the American scene an important and indispensable role.

But it is deeply disturbing in this favorable and in many respects, inspiring situation, to find many of

my friends carrying about with them the longest and most doleful countenances that have ever graced the sidewalks of New York. More disturbing than the countenances however, are some of their ideas. Now these ideas I am referring to certainly deserve a place in a free-ranging discussion and debate on questions of ideology and theory that must arise in the ranks of the Communist Party—and elsewhere among Left and socialist-minded forces—for they deal with matters of genuine concern to the working class and are vital to its future.

No one need fear such a free-ranging, freely held discussion and debate on problems of working-class theory. Such a debate can powerfully aid in routing the dangers of stagnation and isolation. What does need to be feared is any avoidance of open discussion and debate of such problems. What does need to be feared is the creating of a climate inside or outside of our Party which makes such discussion and debate difficult or impossible.

* * *

Now I want to discuss with you some of these ideas affecting theory and ideology which disturb me.

If in so doing, I sound to some of you a bit like Rip Van Winkle walking out into a changed world—I can only ask that you not get too excited or disturbed by it—I know in this situation of no way of avoiding an element of this.

The first and foremost of these

disturbing ideas that I have in mind has to do with this talk about how there is only a past and there is no future for the Communist Party and the science of Marxism-Leninism. I have in mind this idea which says that that which is new in the present situation is that the trade-union movement of this country has become quite capable of developing its own original socialist consciousness and theory and that therefore a body of science such as Marxism-Leninism is no longer needed. And of course, if Marxism-Leninism is no longer needed the Communist Party is no longer needed. This is the idea that out of the experiences of the trade union movement, out of its economic and political struggles there will arise spontaneously, a new socialist theory and science.

Now a great many things, much that is good, arise out of the experiences of the unions in their struggles both economic and political. The one thing that by its very nature cannot arise out of this experience is a scientific socialist ideology and theory. Of and by itself, the trade union movement on the basis of its struggles and experiences can give to the working class the theory and practice of Gompersism, or the theory and practice of John L. Lewis, or the theory and practice of a George Meany, or the theory and practice of Walter Reuther or even a far more far sighted and militant trade union theory and practice. But this experience cannot give to

the working class in 10 years or ten thousand years a socialist consciousness or a body of scientific principles with which it can transform both itself and society.

The ideology and principles of scientific socialism must be imparted to the labor movement, must be fused with the experiences arising out of the economic and political struggles of the unions, must serve to give a consciousness and direction to these struggles that they are inherently incapable of developing spontaneously. This is the role of the Communist Party with its Marxist-Leninist science and ideology. This is why a party such as the Communist Party has a historic, not a transient place in the ranks of the working class. This is why there is not only a past, but also a future. This is why the Communist Party must not only be retained—it must be built.

I am referring to another idea. I am referring to the idea that recognizes the need for imparting to the working class a body of scientific socialist thought, but which then goes on to say that this body of scientific thought must be something other than Marxism-Leninism. This idea usually comes in a package with a few other ideas. Very popular in this package is a thought which starts from a correct premise. This premise is that the world develops, that in the course of this development, certain scientific concepts become obsolete, that new scientific

concepts arise to take their place. From this correct premise, the thought then proceeds to take off into the wild blue yonder. It goes off like this: You know, Newton had a concept of gravitation that replaced older concepts; then Einstein came along with new concepts that replaced those of Newton. Therefore, because all phenomena in the world are subject to the same general laws, something must now come along to replace Marxism-Leninism.

Well, this neat little formula overlooks a mighty big fact. That is, that when you speak of the science of Marxism-Leninism you are not speaking of this or that isolated concept of social or natural phenomena. You are speaking of a concept of the world, its history, its motive forces, and its direction of development as seen from the standpoint of the immediate and historical interests of the working class.

Now of course, specific concepts within the great body of Marxist-Leninist thought do become outmoded. This is particularly true in a epoch of great changes such as this. Being human, each of us, and every Communist Party has a tendency to hang on to these outmoded concepts. A struggle has to be carried on against such tendencies, and that is exactly the kind of struggle that is being mounted today by Marxists everywhere. This is a struggle to bring the great creative science of Marxism-Leninism fully abreast of

POLITICAL AFFAIRS

the sweeping changes that have taken place in the world and in each individual country. This is the problem we American Marxists confront. It is a task that involves boldly analyzing the many important changes that have occurred since and largely as a result of the great struggles of the 20's, 30's and 40's. It involves the aggressive and confident seeking out of the new ways in which, in these changed times, the Communist Party can play—in the the historic sense—its vanguard role under new and changing conditions. But the very thing it does not involve is the abandonment of the most dynamic instrument of change the world has ever known—the creative science of Marxism-Leninism.

There is no body of scientific thought in the world so alien to outmoded concepts, so dynamic and creative as is Marxism-Leninism and to depart from it under the name of need for change and adaptation to new conditions is a theoretical absurdity of the first order. I am referring to certain ideas with respect to the use of that important weapon of Marxist-Leninist theory—criticism and self criticism. I have great confidence in the capacity of the Communist Party. Why I even think we will learn in time to use the powerful weapon of criticism and self criticism as Marxists should in a party, the members of which share in common a devotion to the working class. Now the reason I haven't already launched into a lot of critic-

ism and self-criticism is not that I am not an authority on mistakes. Lord knows, I have made enough of them to be an authority.

The reason is simple—that I am inhibited. You see, many years ago, when I was organizing in the logging camps, and for the IFM in the railroad shops, I made a number of mistakes. This was long before I joined the Communist Party and I'll be darned if I have yet figured out a way to blame the party or Marxism-Leninism for them. But the problem is bigger than this. I haven't even figured out a way I can blame the party and Marxism-Leninism for some of the serious weaknesses and mistakes in my work while I was chairman of the party in New York. As a result, I have been forced to the conclusion that by and large these weaknesses and mistakes were not a product of any built-in deficiency of the party or Marxism-Leninism but that they were more a product of certain deficiencies of Bob Thompson. But let me tell you, I don't feel too badly about this. Any individual, or for that matter if need be an entire leadership in our party, can be criticized right out of leadership, and if the criticism is sound and constructive and we all learn from it, our party and the working class will be strengthened, not weakened.

The reason for this is that criticism and self-criticism is in the first place a weapon to correct people; in particular it is a weapon to correct and if need be to replace leaders.

ON THE COMMUNIST PARTY

The purpose of this weapon is to enhance and strengthen the prestige and role of the Communist Party, to strengthen and enhance the influence of scientific socialism. No one need fear such a weapon. But what then is one to say when criticism and so-called self-criticism becomes something that degrades and drags in the mud the historic role of the Communist Party—when it becomes something that sullies and destroys confidence in the science of the class, Marxism-Leninism. What can one say? Well, I say it is an ignoble, a shameful, warped and distorted thing, a monstrosity.

I am referring to certain ideas with respect to the relationship between the working class of our country, in particular its socialist-minded sectors, and the rising tide of socialism on the world scene.

For one dedicated to the achievement of socialism in his own land, it is especially gratifying to come out of prison at a time when—under the leadership of Communist parties, guided by Marxism-Leninism—socialism on the world scene is in a phase of bouyant advance.

Now it may well be true and it probably is that not many people in America today are discussing this rather remarkable question of whether or not their grandchildren should choose socialism. This is really not very important. What is important is something else. What is important is that the vitally alive 800,000,000 strong system of socialist

lands is having an impact *here and now* on the way of life in our country, that it is changing the complexion of major problems faced by our people in their daily lives.

More schools, more teachers, better courses in the sciences higher school budgets—the chief criteria and a major goad to progress on such matters has already become the competitive role of the blossoming educational system of the USSR. Isn't this a powerful aid to the struggle of the American people, of American labor, for better educational systems in our land?

Integration and the busting up of the Jim Crow system in the South! Will it take a few years or a few decades? Read that section of the southern press that favors giving ground to the rising power of the Negro people and their allies. How do they justify their changing position? They say we have got to change our beloved "South of the Mason-Dixon line" way of life, or lose to Communism two-thirds of mankind which is of colored races. Isn't this a powerful assist to the mighty movement getting strength in our country to effect the democratic transformation of the South?

Atomic energy for the production of electric power and the good and useful things of life—the monopolies say "no," and if they ran this world they would make this NO stick. If they had their way, there is not a man, woman or child, the length and breadth of this land who would ever

POLITICAL AFFAIRS

taste in his lifetime the fruits of this historic advance of man in the conquering of his environment. Well, the monopolies ceased to run this world on November 7, 1917. The USSR is using atomic energy for the production of the good things of life and the people of other socialist lands are or will be building atomic power stations. Capitalism can't let socialism have a monopoly of the use of atomic energy for peaceful productive purposes. It is this, the existence of a system of socialist states, that is opening up the real possibility in our country for giving a new direction to this new and most vital element in our country—a direction which will enable the people to profit from it. Isn't this a powerful assist to the gathering forces of a powerful anti-monopoly coalition in our country?

You know the imperialists here in the United States are a funny lot. They open up a big factional struggle among themselves—drive the isolationists in their own ranks into hiding—and then raise a big hue and cry that the American labor

movement, even its socialist sectors, should isolate itself from its most natural and powerful friend, the great system of socialist states arising in the world. Well, no one can do the impossible. The socialist-minded sectors of the American working class live on the planet in which the rising tide of socialism on a world scale is occurring, and they are themselves a part of this tide. It is this fact which gives them the right to speak out freely and clearly when need arises against negative developments anywhere in the socialist world—as for example, in the case of the important violations of socialist democracy, or mistakes in the handling of the Jewish minority problem in the Soviet Union or elsewhere. But it also means, and this is the most important thing, that they can well afford to take deep pride in the fact that it is this rising power of socialism on a world scale which is largely responsible for the new horizons and possibilities for social gains and progress which are unfolding for the working people of our country.

