
The Thomas-Browder Debate

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by Haim Kantorovitch

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The debate between Norman Thomas and Earl Browder was of great historical significance to the Socialist as well as to the Communist movement. It marked the beginning of a new epoch in our movement, an epoch in which the struggle between Socialism and Communism, a struggle which will go on as long as there will be Socialist and Communists, will take a new and a different form.

Instead of name calling, character assassination, the spreading of misrepresentations and often downright lies, which was the official policy not only of the American Communist Party, but also of the Communist movement all over the world, we will have mutual criticism and discussion.

The debate was not, as some of our Right Wing comrades prophesized, a "love fest," and it is nonsense to designate it as a united front. Neither was it the long looked for open rapprochement between the Militant Socialists and Communists about which the Right Wing has talked so much. Norman Thomas made it very clear that no matter how much, and in what direction, the Communist line may change, no matter how desirable united action may be, Socialism remains Socialism and Communism, Communism.

The new Communist line has not changed Communism. It has changed its tactics. Essentially Communism is what it always was. Neither has Socialism changed. The Socialist opposition to Communism is not based on its abhorrence of Communist tactics. Harmful as these tactics were to the entire proletarian movement, they were not the basis of the Socialist opposition to Communism. The differences between Socialism and Communism are much more funda-

mental. These two broad streams in the proletarian movement represent two different philosophies, two different, mutually exclusive proposals for the achievement of Socialism. Neither the growth of revolutionary Socialism nor the new Communist line have changed anything. The fundamental differences between Socialism and Communism remain what they were. It is true Thomas did not and could not under the conditions of the debate dwell on these differences. He made it clear, however, right at the beginning that it was not a rapprochement, but a debate.

Real Issue was United Front.

The topic of the debate was: "Which Road for the American Workers — Socialism or Communism?" The real issued of the debate, however, was the united front. Has the time for a united front really arrived? Has the 7th Congress of the Comintern [Moscow: July 25-Aug. 21, 1935], with its new line, really made a united front possible? Both debaters may be criticized for debating a topic which was not yet announced, and saying very little on the topic announced. Yet both may, and will be, forgiven. Twenty thousand or more people who packed the hall wanted above all to hear what the representatives of the two main proletarian parties had to say on the united front. One cannot get away from the fact that the united front at present is the most burning issue in the entire labor movement. Whether a united front is possible or is advisable at this time, in this country, is another question.

"When I read the *Daily Worker* now," Thomas said, "I cannot recognize myself, my own wife would not recognize me!" This observation really expressed the feelings of the majority, if not all, present. They remembered then the meetings at the same Madison Square Garden, meetings of trade unions, meetings of Socialists.

They remembered the meeting in honor of the Austrian revolutionists. The same people, or almost the same people, who were at the debate were also there. The same chant: "We want a united front," that was heard at the debate was chanted there. We remember how the police had to clear the hall and escort bleeding combatants — how different it was this time! There were some boos, there was some

hissing, when Thomas said something about Russia which the Communists did not like. These boos and hissings were unavoidable. People who for long years had been fed on the gospel of hate and intolerance to any other opinion but theirs could not be expected to change overnight, even at the bidding of Stalin.

The Change in Line.

This is exactly what Thomas had in mind when discussing the new Communist line, he said. "We want to know whether the past is really the past or only a temporary moratorium." We may add that this question is uppermost now in the mind of every serious observer of the Communist movement. There is something unreal about the new Communist line. One can, of course, understand a change of line by a party which, realizing its mistakes, would try to correct them. There would be nothing strange or suspicious about it, but changes of this kind do not come about suddenly, overnight, without any preceding discussion or self-criticism, without as much as one dissenting voice, as happened at the 7th Congress of the Communist International.

The "tactical mistakes" of the Communist movement were not something apart from Communist philosophy and program. That the Socialists are twin brothers to the fascists; that the Socialist movement is the chief enemy against whom the "main blows" must be directed; that in the interest of the social revolution the Socialist and "reformist" trade unions must be destroyed; that the fight of the Communists against the Socialists and the trade unions was not a fight between disagreeing brothers, but a fight of "class against class," a fight in which all means are fair, no matter how low and dishonest — these are no "tactical mistakes." They are the essence of Communism, the logical application of Communist philosophy to current problems.

When Earl Browder assured his fellow Communists that the Socialist Party is the direct creation of the American capitalist class "because it knows that in the coming great class struggles in America it is going to need the Socialist Party," and that the same American capitalist class "put" Norman Thomas at the head of the party because it wanted "to be sure they have a reliable man at the head of it" (Brow-

der, *The Meaning of Social Fascism*, page 41), he did not make a “tactical mistake.” He simply applied Communist philosophy to the analysis of the Socialist Party. Has this Communist philosophy been changed? No, of course not. Communism remains what it was. What then is the new line? Is it, to repeat the question as Thomas put it, only a temporary moratorium?

A change of tactics may be due to two causes. It may be due to the fact that the Communists sincerely realized their mistakes; that they have convinced themselves that Socialism is not the twin brother of fascism; that the term Socialist is not synonymous with faker and betrayer; that it is not in the interests of the social revolution to destroy the Socialist Party and the trade unions. But a change of tactics may also be due to the fact that the old tactics were not successful in breaking the Socialist Party and the trade unions and a new maneuver must be tried. Maybe the new line will succeed where the old line failed.

What did Earl Browder have to say about it? Nothing! He avoided all references to the motives behind the new line. He appealed again and again for a united front, for a “people’s front” with Catholics, Republicans, and Democrats — but he seems to have failed to realize that the success of his very appeal depends on his answer to the all important question: What are the real motives behind the new line? Is it a change of heart or a maneuver?

The Attitude Toward Russia.

The Communist past is not the only obstacle in the way of a real united front. An even greater obstacle is the Communist attitude towards the Soviet Union, its “great leader,” Stalin, and his enemies. A united front is a temporary union of people of different opinions and ideas for some common end. The Communists have reached the stage where they compel themselves to tolerate non-Communist opinions on the class struggle, on social revolution, even on the problem of proletarian dictatorship. But they cannot tolerate anyone having an opinion about Soviet Russia different than their own. Soviet Russia and Stalin are above criticism. Whoever dares criticize either of them is a counter-revolutionist, just as one is still a counter-revolutionist if

he dares remember the glorious role of Trotsky in the creation of the Soviet state.

Thomas made his position on Soviet Russia very clear. It is the position now held by every Socialist in America as well as Europe. He had nothing but praise for the great constructive work that is being done in Russia. He asserted his belief that the leaders of Soviet Russia are passionately devoted to the building of Socialism. As a Socialist, however, he felt it to be his duty not only to praise but also to criticize. Many mistakes were made in Russia, mistakes for which the Russian masses paid with rivers of blood, untold suffering, and millions of human lives. Most of these mistakes were and are the direct consequences of the Stalinist dictatorship.

Is Russia so weak, Thomas asked, that it cannot afford, 18 years after the revolution, to grant civil liberties to its citizens? And the Russian foreign policy? No one will deny that Russia is above everything else interested in preserving world peace. But its foreign policies are not the policies of a Socialist state, but that of any other capitalist state. It is by Russian oil that the defenseless Ethiopians are killed, Thomas exclaimed.

Communists do not share these opinions. It is true that even they feel quite uncomfortable about it. But they somehow manage to rationalize it away. The important thing, however, is that they cannot tolerate any expression of opinion which they do not share, not even in a debate. Every time Thomas made a critical remark about Russia it was met by the well-known Communist "hiss" and "boo" of the pre-new-line era. It seemed as if they would say: We want a united front but don't you dare have and express any opinion which we do not share! What a poor basis for a united front.

How Near is Unity?

Has the Thomas-Browder debate brought us nearer to a united front with the Communists? By no means. It was a debate and nothing but a debate. The united front will not be created by debates and does not depend upon who made a better argument. It is not only up to the Socialists and Communists to decide on the united front. The labor movement as a whole will also have something to say about it.

A united front between Socialists and Communists with organized labor outside of it or even hostile to it is of no value. The Communists are facing a long and difficult task now in convincing the labor movement that when they say united front they really mean a united front. Only when this task is accomplished will a united front be possible.

That, of course, does not mean, as Thomas made clear in the debate, that no temporary united action is possible. Local and temporary united front actions take place and will surely take place in the future — but they are bound to be local and temporary. The time is not yet ripe for a national and permanent united front. And here again it may be said that Thomas undoubtedly represented the views of the vast majority of party members.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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