

THE COMMUNIST HOAX

BY JAMES ONEAL

IN A RECENT volume of historical studies Sir Charles Oman considers the potency of rumor in war time. Despite the increased facilities for the transmission of information, rumor is then given a new and vigorous lease of life, and an exaggerated credulity persists as a survival after the conflict ends. He cites, among other instances, the familiar tale of the Mons Angels, a troop of shining figures which, so many credulous men and women believed, saved the left wing of the British Army during the Mons retreat. This curious story was traced back to a work of fiction published in an obscure magazine in September, 1914. Considering the psychology of war rumor, Sir Charles concludes "that we are the children of our fathers, that we should not jest too much at 'mediæval credulity,' and that we should recognize in the rumor-phenomena of our own day the legitimate descendants of those which used to puzzle and amaze our ancestors, whom we are too often prone to regard with the complacent superiority of the omniscient Twentieth Century. The Great War has taught us—among other things—a little psychology and a good deal of humility."

It is well to remember this statement, now that so many Americans seem to be under the spell of a fear complex regarding Communism in the United States. Of course, we have Communists, just as we had Jacobins in New York in the days of Robespierre, but this obvious and trivial fact has given rise to grotesque beliefs regarding the number of them, as well as ludicrous exaggerations of their influence upon the generality of organized work-

men. Practically all the estimates that appear in the newspapers, usually sponsored by some public official or some functionary in a "tame" trades union, bear no more relation to reality than the belief in the Angels of Mons. Since the year 1919, when the first organized group of Communists was formed, I have collected their leaflets and books, manifestoes and propaganda papers, convention proceedings and other documents. I have followed their bitter controversies with each other. I have studied their beliefs and the origin, development and varying fortunes of each organized group. The materials gathered during the four years convince me that the estimates recently made that there are from 1,000,000 to 1,500,000 Communists in the United States are quite absurd.

Seventeen Communist organizations, practically all of them claiming to be of national scope, have been formed since 1919. This represents an average of four new ones each year. Stated thus, Communism appears to be a formidable force, but upon analysis it is shown to be extremely feeble. The numerous organizations reveal all sorts of weaknesses and dissensions. Most of them represent men and women resorting to new expedients, new programs and methods, precisely because of their failure to impress any considerable number of people with their old ones. One characteristic of every group has been its charge that all the others followed methods not adapted to winning converts. Another is that after trying its own methods it abandoned them and either formulated new policies or united with others. Yet each new program and each

coalition of two or more groups has usually produced only fresh schisms and desertions. Due to these factors and contrary to the general belief, Communism reached its highest tide in 1919, while in 1924 it is probably at its lowest ebb.

II

A short survey of this movement and its various sects will make this evident. The parent Communist organization in the United States was the Left Wing, a faction within the Socialist party and representing an emotional reaction to the Russian revolution. Forced out of the Socialist organization by the executive committee of the latter in 1919, the Left Wing took with it 30,000 or 35,000 members. In New York it drafted a "Left Wing Manifesto" early in 1919 in which it severely denounced the Socialists for their alleged neglect of various party opportunities during the war. It outlined its own position in the following words:

The party must teach, propagate and agitate exclusively for the overthrow of capitalism, and the establishment of Socialism through a proletarian dictatorship.

The Socialist candidates elected to office shall adhere strictly to the above provisions.

This Left Wing established an organ, the *Revolutionary Age*, which carried on a bitter struggle to capture the Socialist organization and materially weakened the latter. It soon developed, however, that the Left Wing was developing factions of its own, which finally culminated in a split and the organization of the first two Communist parties.

The faction of extremists may be designated as the Left Wing of the Left Wing. It opposed organizing a rival to the Socialist party until after an appeal was made to the national convention of the Socialists, apparently in the hope that its expulsion would be reversed by the convention. It did carry its appeal to the convention of 1919, but, observing at once that its chances there were hopeless, its delegates

soon withdrew. Then the Left Wing of the Left Wing found that it had drifted too far from its own parent body to effect a reconciliation. The result was the organization of two Communist parties out of the membership of the two wings.

The parent Left Wing organized the Communist party in September, 1919. The dissenting faction was meeting in the same city, Chicago, at the same time and attempts were made to unite the two, but without success. The Communist party declared that industrial unionism "is a factor in the final mass action for the conquest of power, and it will constitute the basis for the industrial administration of the Communist Commonwealth." It urged that "councils of workers" be organized in shops and factories and declared that political action was "of secondary importance." The influence of the Russian revolution is evident in this program. Police raids a few months later drove the organization underground and it became a secret society. Two years of this existence finally convinced the leaders that its program was hopeless. Its organ, the *Communist*, in the issue for October, 1922, said: "It cannot be denied that the Communist party of America practically does not exist as a factor in the class struggle. . . . The crying need is an open political rallying centre." It finally abandoned its covert existence in 1923 and found a leading place in the Workers' party, to be considered later. Its membership cannot be estimated accurately. The quarrel between it and the other wing undoubtedly made for many desertions and a rough estimate would give it, at most, not more than 10,000 members.

The Left Wing of the Left Wing organized the Communist Labor party at the same time. The differences between the two parties were actually very slight. One claim of the Communist Labor party was that it had abandoned foreign language federations while its rival retained them. It also charged that "in the Communist party there are innumerable political deals between the incongruous elements which

make it up," meaning that it contained factions that could not be reconciled. Each party claimed a majority of the members of the original Left Wing. It is probable that the two organizations had about the same number of members.

The Proletarian party was the third faction of this type organized in 1919. It was an offshoot of the Michigan section of the Socialist party. Its charter had been revoked by the Socialist executive committee in June, 1919, owing to its adoption of a program requiring its speakers to attack religion. It had little faith in the organization of trade unions and in ameliorative political measures. It was associated with the parent Left Wing in organizing the Communist party but it eventually resumed its independent existence, claiming that it was the genuine Communist organization. Recently advances have been made to it by the Workers' party for union and this has revived the old controversy as to which represents the true Communist faith in this country.

The Industrial Communists constituted the fourth organization formed in 1919. Organized in November of that year, this group did not have more than 25 members, yet it claimed a national existence and drafted a national program! It established a small monthly organ of four pages, the *Industrial Communist*. Denouncing all the other parties, it contended that "any one of them put into power could not establish industrial communism." It proposed to organize the workers in the six basic industries, agriculture, transportation, mining, manufacturing, construction and education, and so build the framework of a new society. It expired within a year.

The Rummager's League, organized in 1922, was the successor to the Industrial Communists. The new organization derived its name from the first sentence in the preamble to its constitution: "We rummage the field of history and science so as to develop the keenest intellect possible." This organization established a "Rummager's Institute" in Chicago with courses

in various subjects and proposed to establish study classes in all the States. The elaborate scheme of organizing the "six basic industries" was abandoned. The Rummagers paid no attention to political and economic organization and in this respect they present a marked variation from the usual Communist type. They dragged out a precarious existence till the end of the year and then disappeared.

The United Communist party appeared on the scene in 1920. This was a union of the Communist and Communist Labor parties. The union was effected in June, but when and where was not disclosed. The program of the new organization declared that "capitalism today faces complete collapse" and that "civil war between the classes now holds the world in its grip." Its program urged "parliamentary action only for the purpose of revolutionary propaganda" while at "appropriate times" it would boycott the elections. It looked forward to the time when a struggle between the classes would develop "into open conflict" which would end in a Communist dictatorship. A large section of the program was devoted to outlining the "Communist reconstruction of society." Some 34 delegates, however, refused to be united. They withdrew and declared that the new program "reeks with the bourgeois horror of the destruction of property and lives."

The year 1921 brought into existence five sects. A small group remaining in the Socialist party caught the infection and organized as the Committee of the Third International. It was dissatisfied because the Socialists refused to affiliate with the international organization of the Communists. It became the object of satirical criticism by other groups and was eventually swallowed by the next organization formed.

This proved to be The Workers' Council, organized in New York City in the Spring of 1921. It established a bi-weekly organ devoted to bitter criticism of the Socialists. It drew its inspiration from the work of the

Committee of the Third International just mentioned, which probably did not have more than 50 members. It believed that there was "a growing sentiment that stands behind the Third International and its principles. All that is needed is a force that will cement this unorganized sympathy and understanding and loose allegiance into a compact body." Like all other organizations of its kind, it proposed to unite all the communist factions. It wanted an "open party" as well. In December of this year it was one of a number of groups that founded the Workers' party.

The African Blood Brotherhood appeared simultaneously. It consisted of a handful of radical Negroes who organized in 1921 to carry the Communist message to their race. It assumed to be of national importance, but there is no evidence that it has ever added to its original small numbers or that it has made any impression upon the Negro people. One of its leading representatives states that its program provides for "racial unification for a free Africa," protection of Negro labor "from exploitation by capitalism," and welcomes "men of the race without attempting to dwarf them before one giant master mind." This is a reference to Marcus Garvey, leader of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, who was recently sent to prison.

The American Labor Alliance, also organized in 1921, was a coalition of numerous scattered groups. Its object was that of the other groups—a union of the forces that had so persistently refused to unite. When it finally merged with others in founding the Workers' party in December, 1921, its report of its membership showed that it was everything but an American alliance. The following sections, it appeared, were affiliated with it: Finnish, Hungarian, Irish, Greek, South Slavic, Spanish, Armenian, Esthonian, Italian, German, Jewish, Lithuanian, Russian and Ukranian. These all represented small groups profoundly impressed by the Russian revolution.

In the Autumn of the same year the Workers' League was founded in New York City. It at last united the Communist parties and most of the other groups. It nominated six candidates in the city election and adopted a platform denouncing the Socialists. While the program demanded "a Workers' Soviet Republic in the United States," it also proposed such moderate reforms as "legislation to combat and stop the reduction of wages," protection of labor organizations "against the open shop drive," and "relief for the unemployed." With its small but active forces devoted to campaign appeals, the candidates of the party polled about 3,000 votes. Despondent over this result, it began to take stock of its resources.

Within one month it reorganized as the Workers' party. The union of the groups in the new party was hailed as an "epoch-making event" and one leader of the old American Labor Alliance wrote that the leaders had displayed "proletarian strategy in fighting the enemy and winning the masses." Such statements, so frequently found in Communist publications, represent an unconscious translation into American experience of the military struggles of the Russian Communists against their invading enemies. But even this union failed to unite all the groups. What was called the Proletarian party maintained a separate existence, while another new organization was formed in bitter antagonism to the Workers' party in 1922. This was the United Toilers, organized in New York City in February of that year. Its organ, the *Workers' Challenge*, declared that all the other organizations betrayed a "total lack of understanding of the correct tactics to be pursued in the labor movement of the United States." It proposed to participate in "daily struggles of the workers," to foster unity of all elements, and to establish propaganda classes and publish literature. It represented a coalition of Ukranian, Lettish and Lithuanian organizations, a woman's organization, two Polish societies, and a number of labor unions inde-

pendent of the American Federation of Labor. Its official publication reeked with the most offensive vituperation its editor could command in denunciation of all other Communists, especially those who had organized the Workers' party. Nevertheless, when the Communist International ordered the United Toilers to disband and join the Workers' party it complied with the order and abandoned its organ as well.

The Workers' party is the final product of all these Communist sects and its official publication proudly boasts of it. Only the small Proletarian party remains out of the fold. But this bringing together of a complex variety of discordant sects in a relatively simple coalition has been accomplished chiefly by a recantation of all the extremist doctrines of 1919 and 1920. In some respects the Workers' party has become more moderate than even the Socialists. The first period of 1919-20 was marked by a sharp drift to the left, but since then the march has been just as marked to the right. Today the greatest apparent ambition of the average Communist is to be a member of a genuinely national labor party. So pronounced is this drift that even the Workers' party could not resist the temptation that had beset all its predecessors—that of forming still another organization.

In New York City the Workers' party had reaped the same disappointment in the November election of 1922 which the Workers' League had realized the year before. It had not won the support of more than a tiny fraction of the voters of the city. The movement entered its fourth year in 1923, and, as we have seen, all the various groups and factions, except one or two, had merged into one organization. Despairing of its future, the Workers' party seized the opportunity offered by the Farmer-Labor party when it issued a call for a national conference in July. It sent delegates to this conference and captured it. This was accomplished by duplicating its representation over and over again—by sending delegates from singing societies,

benefit clubs, gymnastic clubs, educational associations and similar organizations. Through this *coup* it organized a Federated-Farmer-Labor party, now claiming 600,000 members. But this absurd estimate is based upon the padded reports of its own local organizations and the membership of many other organizations, most of which refuse to affiliate with it. Its program contains no Communism whatever. It represents a complete reversal of the extremist doctrines of a few years ago. Thus we have the remarkable spectacle of a movement of various sects competing for extreme positions for a number of years, and then finally uniting in a coalition which competes with more conservative organizations for the most moderate position.

III

Another organization, the I. W. W., remains to be considered. Popular opinion credits the I. W. W. with an intimate relationship with the Communist Internationale. There is no evidence whatever to sustain this theory save that William D. Haywood is associated with the Communist regime in Russia. But against it stands the important fact that Haywood has lost caste with the American organization. He is regarded by his former American associates as a deserter of their cause, precisely because he fled to Russia and accepted Communism.

Contrary to the general opinion, bitter war is waged between the I. W. W. and the Communists. An elementary knowledge of the theories of the two movements would lead one to expect this antagonism. The I. W. W. is opposed to political action and has an intense fear of the state, whether it be the present state of the capitalist countries or the Communist state of Russia. It favors the industrial organization of the wage workers and the extension of this type of organization until it has power enough to take over the industries of the nation, which are then to be owned by the industrial unions.

Political action by the masses would lead to ownership of the nation's industries by the state and in the view of the I. W. W. the state controlled by workingmen is no better than the state controlled by capitalists.

Here are opposing views that form the basis of a fundamental antagonism between the I. W. W. and Communism. The I. W. W. sent a delegate to the Third Congress of the Communist Internationale, held in Moscow in 1921, in the hope of effecting some working agreement or of modifying the conditions prescribed for affiliation. The mission proved to be a fruitless one. A writer in an official publication of the I. W. W. wrote in January, 1922, presenting the reasons why the organization could not affiliate with the Communist Internationale. The I. W. W. view, he explained, is that "it would be suicidal for any revolutionary syndicalist or industrialist labor organization to submit to the dictates of any political party." Another reason, he continued, is that Communists oppose the I. W. W. idea that the industrial union should constitute the "structure" of a new society and also serve as the "midwife" for ushering in this new society. These fundamental differences have made the two movements uncompromising enemies and their partisans engage in bitter controversy whenever they meet.

The Trade Union Educational League, represented by William Z. Foster, is not a political organization, but it boasts of fraternal relations with the Communist movement. It was originally intended for educational work in the trade unions, to make the latter more effective instruments for organized workmen. It came

under Communist influence about a year ago, but it does not represent any increase in either numbers or of prestige for the Communists. It has merely provided another type of organization through which Communists may carry on their activities. It has a small membership and has only succeeded in winning for itself the distrust and bitter hostility of the organized workmen of the country.

This brings us to a consideration of the leading question in this survey. How many organized Communists are there in the United States? My own estimate is something less than 20,000, about one-half the number in 1919. This figure is confirmed by good Communist authority. The Russian Communists subsidize a weekly publication in Berlin, the *International Press Correspondence*, which carries news of Communist movements in all countries and of the internal affairs of Russia. It is an invaluable source of information if we make allowance for certain exaggerations. In the issue for April 19, 1923, a prominent American Communist places the membership of the Workers' party at 20,000. Of this number, he adds, only 1,500 are English-speaking. Communists are accustomed to exaggerate their numbers and power and there is reason for believing that the membership of this organization is even lower than that given. It is this little band of emotional men and women that has been magnified into millions by those unacquainted with the facts and that has inspired wild fears of a neat conspiracy against the Republic! It is the greatest hoax in history. It is an example of that nervous psychology of fear which produced the illusion of the Angels of Mons.