

Communism and the Intellectual

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: Summarizes the pro-Communist and anti-Capitalist speeches by a group of intellectuals at a symposium whose subject was "Why we vote Communist." (DDLW #42).

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Some months ago, "A symposium by and for intellectual workers held under the auspices of the League of Professional Groups for Foster and Ford" was held at Cooper Union. The hall was so packed with young people who wished to hear those whom Earl Browder, an official of the Communist party, termed the cream of the American intellectuals, " that almost a thousand were turned away at the door. " Why we vote Communist " was the subject of the speeches. It will be illuminating to recall them.

Malcolm Cowley, a young poet and critic and one of the editors of the *New Republic*, said briefly that capitalism does not preserve culture and would eventually destroy all culture, so as a critic and poet he would vote Communist because Communism upheld the tradition of culture so dear to his Harvard and *New Republic* heart.

James Rorty, a poet, said he was voting Communist because he didn't want to be a hesitant, doubtful poet like Archibald MacLeish, who wore a top hat, by the way, and because he, James, was having such a lively time, such valuable experiences, and because he didn't even have to stop writing poetry while he soap-boxed for the Communist party. He added that the "stench of physical misery and spiritual degradation of the masses drives poets to Communism."

Donald Henderson, who with his wife has been in the public eye for Communist activities lately, spoke for the universities. He said that the narrowing of the economic base of the system of education, the curtailed salaries, doubling up of classes, reduction of free privileges, increasing of fees, tended so to keep the children of working parents from enjoying educational advantages that it proved to him the failure of the capitalist system and the necessity for its overthrow. From the tremendous applause which greeted Henderson, one would judge that a great part of the audience was made up of college students and instructors.

Harry Jackson, a marine worker, was next on the program and what distinguished his talk was his undisguised satisfaction in the confessed plight of the intellectual. Capitalism, he said in forceful Communist language, was a gigantic dung heap, and usually the intellectual played the part of going around perfuming it. But

now the intellectual wasn't getting the pay he was accustomed to. Now he realized that he, too, was liable to die of starvation. He added, strangely enough, for he is a member of the Communist party:

We've looked for remedies, for patent medicines. Now we are getting right down to the bottom. Give us a hand to find out a formula, you chemists and architects, you professional workers. Tell us what we must do and how, what path we must walk on, how to build a new system of society.

M. J. Olgin, editor of the *Freiheit*, speaking for the foreign-born intellectual, made a general confession of his past life.

I came to America in 1914 because the United States was the only country not interested in the War. I was a Socialist but I was soon disillusioned with both the Socialists of America and the United States. I learned what the words *starvation* and *thug* meant. At Columbia University, which I attended, pictures of Marx and Lassalle hung on the walls of the economics seminar, but it was explained to me that Marx and Lassalle had nothing to do with American life. I finished my courses and I was entitled to teach economics, but my soul recoiled with horror at the idea of teaching the sons of shopkeepers and perhaps of bankers.

Intellectuals "allured" him. They admired a book of his which he didn't think so much of himself, and they took him up. He wrote for the *New Republic*, the *Nation*, the *Century*, but he could not speak the language of the people connected with these journals. He could not assume with them that the foundations of American life were right and that all that was needed were a few little improvements. He was a general favorite in Boston, spoke before the Committee of One Hundred and before women's clubs. He wore evening clothes and went out to dinner and answered childish questions. One lady told him that she could see no difference between him and gentlemen of her acquaintance.

Up to this time he had not understood the Russian revolution. He went back to Russia, and in studying the effects of the revolution he came to despise the part Socialists and intellectuals had played. It was only in the Communist party that he found freedom, agreement with himself, the agreement of work, and ideology. He had only begun to live since joining the Communist party.

Eugene Gordon, journalist, speaking for the Negro intellectual, pointed out how other leaders had failed in their attempts to emancipate their race:

Communism is the only way out for the most pitiable victims of the capitalist system. Their slavery has been perpetuated by wage slavery. They have been kept by the capitalists, ignorant, illiterate, superstitious, loyal, patriotic, and happy.

I am opposed to the mysticism of my race. Religion has been the best weapon in the hands of capitalists against the Negro worker. Because Communist doctrine destroys religion by exposing it to the disintegrating light of reason, I am going to vote Communist.

John Hermann, who some months ago won the *Scribner*****prize, and has published several novels, gave a****talk which could only be interpreted as a burlesque on the talks which had gone before. He finished on a flourish:

“See architects and engineers mowing lawns for their bread! See these and other horrors of the capitalist system! Vote Communist!” Since Hermann is an enthusiastic endorser of the Communist regime in Russia and has traveled over the United States studying the conditions of workers, and has spoken for the party at working-class meetings, one could only think that he was poking fun at the intellectuals who were gathered then together.

Earl Browder, speaking for the Communist party, was the one who referred to the new organization of intellectual workers as the “cream of the intellectual workers in America.” He spoke of the meeting as significant, a “distinct step towards the establishment of a Soviet America,” and added that the sort of intellectuals who were supporting his party came from the very top or the very bottom. Either they were economically independent so that they could choose their course without fear of losing jobs and wages, or else they were newly graduated intellectuals who had neither job nor salary to lose, and had just found out that there was an overproduction of intellectuals as well as of wheat. Socialism, since it was offered to the American people as a substitute for Communism, was the greatest danger in America today.

Waldo Frank, novelist, spent most of his time apologizing for the fact that he was not a working man but a bourgeois, and that the reason why most intellectuals were bourgeois was because there was no opportunity for the worker in America to raise himself to the level of the “intellectual.” Just because he was a bourgeois, he wasn’t going to stop working for the Communist party.

“The League of Professional Groups for Foster and Ford,” the program adds, “is composed of writers, artists, teachers, engineers, physicians, architects, social workers, lawyers, scientists, journalists, and other professional workers who are supporting the Communist ticket this year. With rare exceptions, they are not members of the Communist party.”