PANACEA MASS MOVEMENTS

A PROBLEM IN BUILDING THE DEMOCRATIC FRONT

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PART I

RECENT EXPERIENCE SUMMARIZED

THE fundamental social process now going on in the United States is a far-reaching class differentiation and political realignment. Under the heavy pressure of the prolonged economic crises, the workers, poorer farmers and lower city middle class are rapidly becoming conscious of the interests of their classes and, in a series of sharp mass struggles, are breaking from beneath the ideological and political hegemony of big capital, expressed for so long by capitalist illusions among the masses and by capitalist control of both the Republican and Democratic Parties. They are moving towards the establishment of a political viewpoint, program and organization of their own—a great democratic front of the toiling masses. And the foundation issue around which this profound political process develops is the broad question of progress versus reaction, of democracy versus fascism.

In carrying through this basic class differentiation and political realignment, the masses are largely blazing their own trail, with no definite program or well-thought-out goal in mind. They have no great farmer-labor party; nor has the Communist Party sufficient mass strength and prestige to lead the broad movement. Hence, without a powerful political organization, and established leadership, or an extended independent political experience, a firm discipline, and a cultivated Socialist perspective. these masses, driven on by an urgent need for action, naturally are making many errors in their forward march. It is not strange, therefore, that during the past several years, in their militant attempts to strike blows at their oppressors and to shield themselves from intolerable hardships, the masses, in addition to carrying through such well-executed movements as the Roosevelt campaign, the C.I.O. drives, the struggle of the unemployed, the American Youth Congress, etc., have also spontaneously developed many broad mass movements, motivated by sound aspirations, but with incorrect and even fantastic panacea programs and dangerous demagogic leaders.

What Engels wrote to Sorge in 1887, dealing with the mass movement of that period and criticizing Henry George, still rings true of our period:

> "Affairs are on the move over there at last, and I must know my Americans badly if they do not astonish us all by the vastness of their movement, but also by the gigantic

nature of the mistakes they make, through which they will finally work out their way to clarity." *

Let us now briefly review and analyze the more important of the panacea movements that have been such a striking feature of the past several years.

CONFUSIONISM AND DEMAGOGY

a. *Technocracy*: This movement, headed by Howard Scott of New York, swept swiftly through the whole press of the country in 1932-33, during the midst of the great economic crisis, creating something of a national sensation. It was an adaptation of the ideas of Thorstein Veblen and of I.W.W. syndicalism. The Technocrats saw the industrial crisis as developing because "the price system" had grown obsolete in the face of the great technological advances of recent years. In a nutshell, their panacea provided for the adoption of "ergs," or energy units, to serve as a system of exchange in place of the "price system" and also that the direction of society be turned over to the engineers, whom they considered the basic source of all social progress. The intelligentsia were especially intrigued by this movement.

Technocracy was founded upon the elementary fallacy of ascribing the cause of industrial crises with all their profound political consequences, merely to the capitalist method of exchange, instead of to the basic contradictions of capitalist production—namely the private ownership of the social means of production and distribution, with the resultant production for profit instead of for use. Linked with this profound error was a whole series of other gross misconceptions, including the denial that the workers are an exploited class, the rejection of the class struggle and the revolutionary role of the proletariat, the notion of the liquidation of the working class through the development of automatic machinery, the naive assumption that the capitalists would turn over the control of society to the engineers, etc. The general tendency of technocracy was to confuse the intellectuals, to create defeatism among the masses and to weaken the mass struggle for practical measures of immediate relief and for socialism as the ultimate solution.

The technocracy movement, after its brief splurge of publicity, was overwhelmed by the great industrial and political struggles of its period, as well as by the growth of more alluring and less technically complicated panaceas. Now only traces of it remain. An analysis of this movement is contained in the pamphlet *Technocracy and Marxism,* by Earl Browder and William Z. Foster, and also in the article, "Technocracy, a Reactionary Utopia," by V. J. Jerome, in THE COMMUNIST for February, 1933.

b. *Epic*: The Epic (End-Poverty-In-California) movement, headed by Upton Sinclair, centered in California, although it also produced substantial repercussions in many Western states. It developed very swiftly, following the publication of Sinclair's book, *I, Governor of California,* in October, 1933. The basis of the Epic movement was the principle of self-help by the unemployed. It had its roots in the fact that up until that time the huge

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masses of unemployed, verging into actual starvation conditions, were receiving little or no assistance from the local, state and national governments, and in many localities were trying to help themselves by various small productive and bartering enterprises. Sinclair seized upon this tendency and proposed the taking over of idle factories and land by the state and setting up of a system of production and barter by the unemployed that would not only abolish unemployment, but also open the doors to a growth of general prosperity.

This utopia had the basic flaw of assuming that a separate, non-profit-making production and exchange regime could be built within the framework of the capitalist system, which is based upon private ownership and production for profit. It overlooked the fact that while capitalists—hostile to any production-for-use project—owned the great natural resources, industries and transportation systems, they could and would (and they did) block the growth of Sinclair's barter system. The Epic had the practical disadvantage for the masses of thrusting itself athwart the unemployed workers' intense struggle for government relief. Sinclair put forth his Epic plan as a substitute for the more realistic program of state aid, one of his major arguments being that self-help by the unemployed would relieve the taxpayers of the huge sums otherwise necessary for a system of social insurance.

Despite its glaring fallacies, Epic caught the imagination of the starving Californian masses and it ran like wildfire among them. The movement expressed itself politically through the Democratic Party, which fell largely under the control of the Epics. The big capitalist interests of California fought Epic ruthlessly, and in the elections of 1934, Sinclair, candidate for governor on the Democratic ticket, was beaten by Merriam by a vote of 1,138,000 to 879,000, with the third party candidate, Haight, polling 304,000. After this defeat the Epic movement gradually declined, until now there are only vestiges of it left. Analyses of Epic are to be found in an article by Robert Minor in THE COMMUNIST, of December, 1934, and in the pamphlet, *Sinclair, Will His Epic Work?* by Sam Darcy.

c. *The Utopian Society*: This movement was initiated by Eugene J. Reed in the fall of 1933 in Southern California. Amazing its leaders and everyone else, it grew like a mushroom and soon claimed a million members at its maximum. Its following was largely middle class. The Utopians declared themselves for the "Brotherhood of Man" and Plenty for All," and they proposed, through exercise on the "Right of Eminent Domain by the Government," to establish the "Cooperative Commonwealth" through government ownership. The movement was educational and, copying from fraternal orders, had an elaborate ritual. The Utopians—well-named—failed to recognize the class struggle, had no practical program of day-to-day demands, and collapsed in confusion in 1934, in the face of the more solid Epic and Townsend movements. Now only a few grouplets are left of the Utopians.

d. *The Townsend National Recovery Plan*: This great mass movement, which, like several others of its

type originated in Southern California, was formally launched by Dr. Francis E. Townsend in Long Beach, in April, 1934. Its cure-all consisted of maximum pensions of $200 per month for the aged, to be financed primarily by a 2 per cent transactions tax. The money—some twenty billion dollars annually—put into circulation by the pension payments, was supposed, not only to provide care for the old and jobs for the unemployed, but especially to raise generally the purchasing power of the masses and thus to establish a broad and expanding prosperity. The movement dubbed itself a "permanent national cure for depression."

As a self-sufficient solution for the capitalist crisis, the Townsend Plan was altogether naive. It failed utterly to note that while the land and great industries remained in the hands of private owners the latter would have the capacity, through raising prices, lowering wages, etc., to cancel out, largely if not wholly, the increased mass purchasing power brought about by Townsend's old-age pensions. Hence, the plan did not realize that to protect and extend mass purchasing power, a great political struggle of the exploited classes is necessary on many fronts, which eventually culminates in the abolition of capitalism and the establishment of socialism. As an immediate project of old-age pensions, the Townsend Plan had two major weaknesses: (1) of setting an impractical pension figure, $200 per month, for an old person, amounting to double the present average wage of an able-bodied employed worker, or four times as much where both the man and his wife should draw pensions; and (2) of throwing the burden of financing the pensions upon the masses themselves, through the transactions, or sales tax, instead of upon the wealthy. The plus and minus features of the plan are analyzed in Alex Bittelman's pamphlet, *The Townsend Plan.*

The Townsend movement ran swiftly all over California and then throughout the nation. It was animated by a religious-like enthusiasm and its leaders soon claimed several million members, especially among the older strata of the population. The movement suffered a serious crash during the Presidential elections of 1936, when its reactionary leadership, in an ill-fated attempt to defeat Roosevelt and the New Deal, tried to line up its following behind the third party candidate, Lemke. Notwithstanding heavy losses, the movement still retains considerable force and vitality in many states and is now showing a decided tendency to revive.

e. *The National Union for Social Justice*: The organizer of this vast national movement, Father Charles E. Coughlin, Catholic priest of Detroit, began speaking on the radio in 1926; but it was only during the great industrial crisis that he secured his huge audience and finally developed his program. In February, 1934, *Fortune* estimated his Sunday radio listeners at 10,000,000. On November 11, of that year, Coughlin launched his Union for Social Justice. He had a cure-all program, including the issuance of ten billion dollars in unsupported currency, a central bank of issue, the "nationalization of banking, credit and currency, power, light, oil, natural gas and all natural resources." For the farmers he offered "production at a profit"; for the workers "a just living

wage": for the aged, liberal pensions; and for the unemployed, jobs.

Coughlin's program was based upon the traditional American illusion of cheap money, inflation. It was vague, and full of contradictions and demagogy. His proposals to issue an ocean of fiat money, by sending living costs sky-rocketting, would have drastically worsened instead of bettered the conditions of the masses. His demands for nationalization of "all public necessities," were just so much wind. His violent attacks upon "the international bankers" were rank demagogy, since he, himself, a silver speculator, was closely allied with some of the biggest banking concerns. He and his agitation constitute one of the most dangerous manifestations of growing fascism that this country has yet seen.

Coughlin's organization, which was especially strong among Middlewest farmers, city middle class elements, and Catholic industrial workers, became so widespread and powerful that he was credited with defeating several important progressive bills pending before Congress. But his movement, like Townsend's, suffered a rude setback when, true to his fascist character, he undertook to line it up against Roosevelt in the 1936 elections. But its remnants still remain a potentially malignant danger. Important pamphlets dealing with Coughlin's movement are, *How to Win Social Justice,* by Alex Bittelman, and *The Truth About Father Coughlin,* by A. B. Magil.

f. *Share-the-Wealth*: The leader of this remarkable mass movement was United States Senator Huey P. Long of Louisiana. Long's movement first took on definiteness and an epidemic character early in 1935. With his slogans of "Share the Wealth" and "Every Man a King," Long had as the basis of his utopia a gigantic capital levy. He proposed to take away from the capitalists all their wealth "in excess of three or four million dollars apiece." The 165 billions thus acquired, Long declared he would share among the people, each family receiving some $5,000. The "Kingfish" also promised to guarantee every worker's and farmer's family a minimum yearly income of $2,500, besides old-age pensions "without stint or unreasonable limit" for the aged, and an elaborate educational program for the youth.

The Share-the-Wealth agitation was the most fantastic panacea, and its leader, Long, the most dangerous demagogue this country has yet seen. They were fascism in the making. They went to evidence the bizarre illusions that starving, unorganized and despairing masses can fall victims to. The demagogic character of Long's program was exposed by the fact that whereas, obviously, to carry through the great capital levy he advocated, the socialist revolution would be necessary, he nevertheless was a violent enemy of socialism and proposed virtually to expropriate the capitalists painlessly, without changing the present system, and even "without removing the capitalists from the ownership and management of industry." Long's crass demagogy was further shown by the fact that in Louisiana, where he had set up the tightest and most ruthless political dictatorship in American history, he was allied with big capitalist interests and he had done precisely nothing to relieve the desperate conditions of the crisis-stricken masses.

The backwoods Hitler, Huey P. Long, mixed his panacea-mongering with circus antics and fundamentalist religion. His movement ran like a contagion through the sharecroppers and poor farmers of Louisiana, and spread swiftly to several other Southern states. So powerful did the "Kingfish" become almost overnight that he was openly laying plans to capture the Presidency of the United States, when he was shot and killed in September, 1935. Long's successor, the notorious fascist Reverend Gerald L. K. Smith, led the Share-the-Wealth movement to a debacle by joining up with the Coughlin and Townsend movements in their ill-fated Lemke third party attempt to defeat Roosevelt in the 1936 elections. Analyses of the Share-the-Wealth movement are to be found in *How Can We Share the Wealth?* by Alex Bittelman, and *The Real Huey P. Long,* by Sender Garlin. The Long and Coughlin movements are also dealt with in *The Peril of Fascism,* by A. B. Magil and Henry Stevens.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

The foregoing movements had one quality in common, which was fundamental in characterizing them—they were all based upon burning grievances and hardships of the masses. This explains their broad extension, high degree of spontaneity, and prairie fire-like spread. Thus, it was no accident that the Share-the-Wealth movement sprang up among the half-starved sharecroppers in the South; that the Union of Social Justice originated in Detroit, one of the communities hardest hit by the industrial crisis; and that several other of these movements (Epic, Utopians, Townsend, etc) spontaneously generated in Southern California, where crisis conditions were especially acute. Despite their usually demagogic leadership, these broad movements were at bottom attempts of the impoverished masses to correct unbearable conditions. Also, although they had different approaches—"erg" money system, education, inflation, "purchasing certificates," capital levy, old-age pension, unemployed self-help, etc., they all had far-reaching social programs, amounting to cure-all panaceas, that definitely reflected the wavering faith of the masses in the capitalist system. Basically, in so far as the popular aspirations were concerned, the panacea movements were blood relations to the great organizing campaigns and strikes of the C.I.O. and A. F. of L., the big struggles of the unemployed led by the Communist Party, the widespread farmers' strikes, the broad youth movement, the great Roosevelt election campaign, etc., of the same period.

In the confused mass panacea there lurked a serious fascist danger, varying in degree in each case according to the character of its leadership. Most of them were led by reactionary demagogues—notably Coughlin, Long, Gerald L. K. Smith, and Townsend—who were the agents of fascist-minded finance capital and who did all possible to steer their broad movements into anti-democratic, anti-progressive channels. They poisoned them with anti-Negro, anti-trade union, anti-Jew, anti-New Deal, anti-foreign-born, and anti-Communist sentiment, and made them breeding nests of fascism generally. Nascent fascism at the time secured its strongest following among the masses through these movements.

Many powerful capitalists, not at all deceived or alarmed by the demagogues' pseudo-radicalism and their attacks upon the "international bankers" and Wall Street, gave them active support. Thus, Long had the backing of Standard Oil and of many banking, railroad and other capitalist interests in Louisiana; Coughlin was definitely tied up with Hearst, Macfadden, the big Detroit auto manufacturers and powerful financial interests; Townsend became a darling of the Republican Party bosses. The only one of all these movements combatted by a solid capitalist opposition was the Epic, led by the honestly confused Upton Sinclair.

Bad effects were produced among the masses by the reactionary activities of Coughlin, Long and Townsend, and also by the widespread disillusionment provoked by the collapse of the various utopian bubbles. Nevertheless, the general result of the several movements in question was to deepen and strengthen the struggle of the masses for practical demands. Thus, Technocracy undoubtedly did much to expose the needlessness of mass starvation in the midst of potential plenty and it thereby encouraged intelligent mass discontent; Epic helped to dramatize the fight of the unemployed; the Townsend movement definitely made a burning national issue of old-age pensions; and even such reactionary-led movements as those of Coughlin and Long, left-handedly, by raising grave dangers of fascism, probably stimulated the New Deal, as a precaution against them, to provide more adequate mass relief.

The several mass movements dealt with, above all, bore characteristic earmarks of the urban petty bourgeoisie. While huge numbers of poor farmers and workers (especially the unorganized, the unemployed, and white-collar elements, and in the case of the Coughlin movement—Catholic workers) participated in these panacea movements (even approximate statistics are not to be had), nevertheless the immediate hegemony over them all was definitely in the hands of the city petty bourgeoisie. This is shown, not only by the typical middle-class confusion of their programs, but also by the makeup of their leadership. Thus, the movements under consideration had as their outstanding leaders Howard Scott (engineer), Upton Sinclair (writer), Eugene J. Reed (small broker), Francis E. Townsend (doctor), Charles E. Coughlin (priest), Huey P. Long (salesman-politician), Gerald K. Smith (preacher), Willis Allen (lawyer), etc. There were hardly any proletarians or trade union officials among the key leaders and initiators.

It was very significant also that, although large numbers of workers participated in these various confused mass movements, the trade unions as such, except in local instances (notably Epic), took little part in them. Neither the A. F. of L. nor, later, the C.I.O., nationally endorsed any of their vagaries. Characteristically, the great movement of the proletariat in this stormy period, in so far as it was independently expressed, followed trade union lines, but with the advancements over conservative A. F. of L. unionism that we all know of—industrial unionism in the basic industries, more conscious political action, more militant strike action, etc. This steadiness of the trade

union movement in the midst of so many surging and alluring utopian mass movements was a testimonial to the naturally greater clear-sightedness of the working class and the superiority of its organizations, in contrast with the confused and unorganized petty bourgeoisie.

Another highly important phenomenon, in connection with the panacea mass movements, was their failure to draw the organized youth of the country into their orbits. This was largely due to the intelligent leadership, constructive program and widespread activities of the American Youth Congress. The significance of this whole development is realized when one recalls the big role of the youth in fascist movements usually.

All the mass movements under discussion displayed a common ephemeral character. They spontaneously generated, spread with lightning rapidity, and then rapidly declined. The major causes for their subsidence were the successful mobilization of millions of workers and other toilers into the trade unions and generally around the banners of the New Deal; the easing of the industrial crisis, and the measure of mass relief achieved through the partial realization, by legislation and otherwise, of the New Deal program.

As we have already seen, the Technocracy movement, after being "a seven-days' wonder," subsided in the face of the advancing Roosevelt 1932 election campaign; the Utopians were absorbed by the aggressive Epic and Townsend movements; Epic met its nemesis in a head-on collision with the forces of reaction in the California elections of 1934; and the Long, Coughlin and Townsend movements were badly mangled by the great Roosevelt sweep of 1936. The fascist-minded demagogues at the head of these latter movements thought the Presidential elections would be closely contested and that it would be possible for them to defeat Roosevelt. Not daring to swing their hosts openly behind Landon, they launched their Lemke third party candidacy. But the masses were able to see through this election maneuver and to understand that the real issue at stake was between Roosevelt and Landon, between progress and reaction. Their sense of realism triumphed, they deserted their fascist-like leaders in millions, to the discomfiture of Coughlin, Townsend, Gerald K. Smith & Co., and consequently the heavy weakening of their movements became a matter of history.

But if the mass movements in question displayed a lack of stability and permanency, we must not draw the conclusion therefrom that their type presents no present danger. This would be a serious error. The cause of the relative decline of these movements was that the conditions were not ripe for them to be given definite fascist organization and consolidation.

THE ROLE OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY

The Communist Party played an important part in preventing the many panacea mass movements here analyzed from becoming fascist instruments of reaction, and aided in directing their vast elemental force towards the achievement of constructive ends for the masses. In many articles, pamphlets, and speeches our Party carried through a thorough-going Marxian analysis of the various current cure-alls and panaceas, exposing ther falla-

cies, and setting over against them practical immediate demands and the ultimate socialist goal. Our Party also took an active part in building up the great progressive mass movements that are at once the preventative and the cure for such confusionist movements as Technocracy, Epic, Share-the-Wealth, the Townsend Plan, etc.; namely, the big fight of the unemployed for relief, the great organizing campaigns and strikes of the trade unions, the extension of the huge masses in the Roosevelt New Deal election campaigns and legislative struggles—in short, the building of a great democratic front.

At the first outcropping of the panacea mass movements during the depth of the crisis we made some mistakes of a sectarian character. There was a tendency to see only their features of incipient fascism, and to ignore the legitimate demands of the great masses that formed their base. This was especially the case with regard to the Epic movement in California. But our Party soon grasped the significance of the whole development and adopted a policy of penetrating these movements with the objective of at once exposing their fallacies and directing their struggles to practical ends in concert with the struggling masses in other fields. At the Ninth Convention of our Party, in June, 1936, the situation was summed up in a resolution as follows:

"In the absence of a strong, independent political party of the working class, with the still prevailing political immaturity of the wide masses and aided by the belief that the tremendous productive capacities and natural riches of this country by themselves offer a way out, these mass yearnings for a new social order become diverted into various utopian, reformist and even reactionary channels. Common to all these tendencies is the old petty-bourgeois illusion that poverty and insecurity can be abolished by certain changes in the sphere of credit, money circulation and distribution without abolishing the capitalist mode of production. Bourgeois radicalism and social reformism try to build upon this basis such movements as 'Epic' and 'Townsend'; on the other hand, fascist and semi-fascist adventurers (Long, Coughlin, Talmadge), exploiting brazenly the yearnings of the masses for a new social order and their petty bourgeois illusions, seek to build up breastworks of fascism and reaction with the backing of powerful sections of the most reactionary monopolies. . . .

"It is, therefore, the task of the Communists to establish firm contacts with the masses in these movements, to work within them, to develop common struggles for immediate demands on issues that are most vital to these masses, and, on the basis of such common work and struggles, to overcome their petty-bourgeois illusions and to lead them in the direction of the revolutionary struggle against capitalism, which alone will realize their yearnings for a social order of security and plenty." *

(To be concluded in the December issue.)

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* *Resolutions of the Ninth Convention of the Communist Party,* pp. 10-11. Workers Library Publishers, New York.