

THE AMERICAN VETERANS COMMITTEE CONVENTION

By JOHN GATES

THE FIRST Constitutional Convention of the American Veterans Committee, born of World War II and consisting exclusively of veterans of that war, was held in June at Des Moines, Iowa. In view of the reactionary leadership and policies of the old line veteran organizations, the progressive character of the A.V.C. convention holds great significance for the future of the veterans in the United States.

The Convention was attended by approximately 900 delegates from 350 chapters, representing 35,000 members of a total estimated membership of 60,000 at the time of the convention. The delegates were predominantly white collar workers, professionals, small businessmen and students, with only 25 Negro delegates and a sprinkling of women. This is an accurate reflection of the membership composition of A.V.C. at present. Contrary to the practice of the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars, this convention was extremely serious, business-like and democratic with a

100 per cent participation of the delegates in the affairs of the convention.

FOREIGN POLICY

In general, the convention adopted a liberal, progressive program with some exceptions. On foreign policy, the principle of Big Three unity was adopted, with World Government to evolve out of the effective functioning of the United Nations. This was an improvement over the draft platform, which made World Government the main basis for world peace, in that it makes World Government conditional upon cooperation between the Big Three. Nevertheless, the insistence upon the concept of World Government, while showing the idealistic desires of the convention, betrayed a basic lack of understanding that this reactionary utopian concept is being used today against the veto right which is the very heart of Big Three cooperation.

The program called for a rupture of relations with Franco-Spain, for recognition of the Spanish government-in-exile, for a democratic policy in China, for self-determination for Puerto Rico and for the freedom of the colonial peoples. The convention demanded the internationalization of atomic energy and a halt to the production of atom bombs, but endorsed the Baruch report which would permit the United States to continue to manufacture atom bombs until it alone decides to stop doing so, and would do away with the veto right, thus enabling the United States to dominate the United Na-

tions and world affairs. With respect to the armed forces, peacetime universal military training was opposed, but extension of the draft was endorsed on the grounds of being essential for our occupational commitments. The truth is that our regular army is several times big enough to handle our commitments in Germany, Italy and Japan (aside from the fact that that army is being used to aid fascist reaction and to fight against real democracy everywhere) and that extension of the draft makes possible the keeping of American armed forces in China, the Philippines and in far-flung bases in the Pacific, Atlantic and Latin-America for imperialistic purposes.

The foreign policy program, while generally progressive, is thus seen to contain a considerable amount of confusion. This is explained by the fact that the convention showed no understanding and recognition of the imperialistic, aggressive, world-dominating role of U.S. imperialism as the main threat to world peace. Unless the A.V.C. is able to learn from events and to eliminate the elements of confusion in its foreign policy, it stands in danger of receding from its progressive position to a reactionary one. In general, however, its policy constitutes a minimum program on which progressive veterans can collaborate to preserve the peace and stands in fundamental contrast to the reactionary imperialist program of the American Legion,

V.F.W., Catholic War Veterans, etc., providing it is actually carried out by the A.V.C.

The domestic affairs program endorses the fight for the Full Employment Bill, the FEPC, the Wagner-Ellender-Taft Housing legislation, extension of price control, river valley authorities, the Minimum Wage Act, the Wagner Health Act, support to the organizing drives of the unions, etc. Active participation in the coming elections was advocated, with A.V.C. chapters to concentrate on getting out the veteran vote and setting up independent veterans committees to campaign for progressive candidates, since the A.V.C. cannot officially endorse candidates. This is an excellent program which goes in the opposite direction from that of the major veteran organizations, which tend to follow the lead of the National Association of Manufacturers and the reactionary bi-partisan coalition in Congress.

BASIC WEAKNESSES

But it was on veterans affairs, where it should have stood out, that the A.V.C. made its weakest contribution, a fact which may have very serious consequences for the organization. What was adopted was good (with one exception), but it received the last and least consideration of the convention. So true is this that many observers remarked that one would scarcely have known he was attending a veterans convention were there not so many "ruptured ducks" in evi-

dence. A most serious error was made in decisively rejecting a bonus by a 2-to-1 vote. The underestimation and neglect of veterans affairs and the stand on the bonus show the contradictions and dilemma from which the A.V.C. suffers.

The dilemma of the A.V.C. stems from its main slogan, "Citizen First, Veteran Second," coined by Charles Bolte, head of A.V.C., and popularized in his book of the same name. The slogan is catchy but essentially misleading. It is responsible for much of the progress of A.V.C. but also for most of its problems and failures. Its good side lies in that it emphasizes that the veteran is part of the nation, that he cannot solve his problems unless those of the nation are solved too, and in that it opposes the reactionary efforts to set the veteran apart from, and in opposition to, the working class. This is undeniably progressive and has attracted considerable support for A.V.C., particularly from non-veterans.

The harmful side of the slogan lies in its relegating the fight for the special needs of veterans into a secondary category. It implies that such a fight is somehow in contradiction to the interests of the nation as a whole. Indeed, its logic leads to the denial of the reason for the existence of veterans' organizations at all. If the primary purpose of the A.V.C. is its general political program, then there are many other organizations which the veteran can join that are

far more effective. But the masses of veterans will only join a *veterans* organization if they can find an answer to their problem *as veterans*. What would be the result if trade unions were guided by the philosophy of: Citizen First, Worker Second? That is exactly what the worst enemies of the unions try to prove, that the interests of trade unions are inimical to the nation, and by means of this they seek to hamstring and destroy the effectiveness of the unions. But trade unions are champions of the economic interests of the workers and, as such, do not hinder but enhance the well-being of the nation. Trade unions espouse broad general programs too, but they secure their mass base (and hence their effectiveness) by their fight for the immediate interests of the workers.

If the A.V.C. hopes to attract even the first two hundred thousand members in its drive for "A Million Members, A Million Dollars," it must establish itself as the foremost champion of the special needs of the veteran, as well as of a progressive general program. Millions of veterans have joined the Legion and V.F.W., despite their reactionary leadership and program, because of the many services performed for them as veterans. As a matter of fact, the A.V.C. contradicted its own slogan in its forthright fight for the Wyatt Housing Program which is a "Veterans First" program!

It is not surprising that so few

Negro veterans belong to the A.V.C. While the A.V.C. is opposed to discrimination, it conducts no major or consistent struggle for the extremely pressing needs of the Negro veteran. At Des Moines, the convention forced the arrest of a restaurant proprietor who had refused to serve a Negro delegate, but it then spoiled the victory with a statement absolving the City of Des Moines of any responsibility for the discrimination against Negroes. This was no service to the Negroes who live in Des Moines and who will continue to be discriminated against long after the convention has gone. The superficial approach of the A.V.C. to Negro veterans, in effect denying their special problems, proves the wisdom of those veterans who formed the United Negro and Allied Veterans of America. No other organization of veterans today answers the urgent needs of the Negro veteran.

The underestimation of veterans' needs by the A.V.C. is a result of the middle-class character of the organization. It is not yet representative of the mass of veterans who are faced with serious economic problems. The A.V.C. must look for its mass base to the 72 per cent of the armed forces who held social security cards, which means that they worked for a living, to the three million who belonged to unions prior to entry into the service, to the half-million student-veterans, to the million Negro veterans, to the women veterans and to the merchant seamen, as well

as to the progressive middle-class veterans so far attracted to it. But it will only attract the lower income veterans by vigorously fighting for their needs as veterans, as well as for the general program of the A.V.C.

Is the veteran's problem gradually disappearing? An analysis of history and of future economic perspectives answers *no* to this question. The veteran's problem after World War I reached its climax and erupted 14 years after the end of that war in the Bonus March of 1932. The veteran's problem is thus seen to be quite persistent and intimately tied up with economic conditions. If we were going into a period of permanent boom and full employment, then of course the veteran's problem (aside from that of the disabled) would disappear. But such is not the outlook before us, at least as long as capitalism exists. Even in a period of high production and employment, such as at present, the standard of living of the people is being forced down through the rise in the cost of living and the robbery of the workers' earnings and savings. There is considerable unemployment among veterans, estimated at well over one and a half million. Meanwhile, the factors are fast accumulating for a great economic crisis that will dwarf that of 1929, which produced such ferment amongst veterans.

THE BONUS QUESTION

In view of this perspective, the

A.V.C. must reconsider its attitude toward a federal bonus. The main arguments against the bonus were: (1) It is a "handout"; (2) It is inflationary; (3) If the veteran can secure a decent job, decent wage and living conditions he would not need a bonus. The answer to the last argument is that he is not getting those things, and under capitalism things are going to become much worse, so that the fight for a bonus is part of the daily fight for a higher standard of living. The first two arguments sound very strange coming from a progressive pro-labor organization. They are the stock-in-trade arguments habitually used by the Chamber of Commerce, N.A.M., and the bi-partisan reactionary coalition in Congress against unemployment relief, social security, wage increases, and all expenditures for the benefit of the people.

It is easy to understand the contemptuous rejection of the bonus as a handout by the few millionaire's sons present at the convention, but its rejection by the A.V.C. as a whole raises serious doubts in the minds of the overwhelming majority of veterans as to whom the A.V.C. really represents. The bonus is no more a handout than are mustering-out pay, terminal-leave pay, and allowances under the G.I. Bill of Rights, all of which the A.V.C. supports. It represents the recognition that the veteran made great sacrifices for our country, and that in order to start out, after an absence of several years,

on an equal basis with the rest of the population, he needs and deserves considerable assistance from the government. The veteran needs to catch up, and the program to help him do that, which includes the bonus, is not a "handout" but legitimate and essential differential pay for losses suffered and services rendered during the war. One can debate the amount of a bonus and the manner in which it should be paid, but to argue against the principle of a bonus is to argue against the need for special and extra assistance to the veterans.

The charge that a bonus would cause inflation is ridiculous. The payment of a bonus to World War I veterans caused no inflation. On the contrary, it helped to ease the burden of the depression on the people. Increases in wages, and other means of increasing the purchasing power of the people, such as a bonus, will cut into the exorbitant profits of Big Business, but they are not the cause of rising prices or of inflation. It is the monopolistic control of industry by the giant trusts, their refusal to accept reduced profits and their desire for ever greater profits, which are responsible for the present price rise. Moreover, the rising cost of living is robbing the worker of his wage increase and the G.I. of his benefits, so that increased wages and allowances for veterans, including a bonus, are urgently necessary in addition to the maintenance of price controls.

LABOR AND THE VETERANS

The recent *Fortune* poll reveals a very important trend among veterans. The poll compares the attitude of the public toward labor and management last fall and this spring. It reveals 25 per cent for labor, 45 per cent for management, and 29 per cent "don't know," last fall; and 37 per cent for labor, 37 per cent for management, and 26 per cent "don't know," this spring—a decided trend in the nation generally in favor of labor. But the figures for *veterans* this spring show 43 per cent for labor, 41 per cent for management, and 16 per cent "don't know," a higher pro-labor sentiment among veterans than among the people generally.

These facts are hardly surprising. They reflect the largely working-class composition of the veterans, as well as their disillusioning experiences in becoming adjusted to civilian life. The veteran is beginning to learn the truth about the allegedly fabulous salaries of war workers, and placing responsibility for low wages, high prices, shortage of homes, clothing and food upon the big trusts and their exorbitant profits. At the same time the veteran is becoming increasingly conscious of the progressive role of the labor movement in fighting for a decent standard of living. On the other hand, one should not overlook the high percentage of veterans for management, higher than that of the public as a whole.

This shows that a considerable number of veterans still retain the anti-labor indoctrination they received while in the armed forces, and also that reaction has been somewhat successful in convincing some veterans that the labor movement is responsible for the run-around they have been getting.

Reaction is seeking to get a foothold among the veterans. It is doing this primarily through its control of the major veterans' organizations and through the Scripps-Howard and Hearst press. The leadership of these veterans' organizations is reverting back to its traditional anti-Communist, anti-labor role of before the war. Stelle and Stack of the Legion and the V.F.W. make this the central theme of every speech they make. They echo Attorney General Thomas Clark and J. Edgar Hoover. It is a planned, concerted part of the "get tough with Russia," "get tough with the world," "get tough with the people" policy of the American monopolists.

The veteran's problem will more and more become a major issue. It will reach its climax when America is plunged into an inevitable economic crisis. The lesson of nazism in Germany teaches us that reaction can win large masses of disillusioned and demoralized veterans for its program if a united labor movement fails to develop a program and effective struggle for the needs of the veterans. Fortunately, the labor movement here has made significant

beginnings in this direction in the adoption of veterans' programs, the formation of veterans' committees, and the organization of many struggles on behalf of veterans.

These are, however, only the merest beginnings. There are great weaknesses in the labor movement of which the employers are not unconscious, and they are increasing their efforts to win the veteran and poison him against labor. Labor must not fall into the trap of thinking that all is well with the veteran, that the veteran's problem is disappearing, and that it therefore need feel no concern with it. Labor must continue and extend its fight for the needs of the veteran, both inside and outside the unions, must develop further the alliance between the trade unions and the veterans through united action on the common issues confronting both.

RED-BAITING OPPOSED

A significant aspect of the A.V.C. convention was its attitude toward Red-baiting. The only public Red-baiting was expressed by the fake liberal, Stassen, who was very coldly received. Several delegates had come with anti-Communist resolutions, but taking heed of the atmosphere of the convention they did not dare to present them. Nevertheless, a certain amount of sly Red-baiting took place behind the scenes, mainly by the friends of Reuther and Dubinsky present at the convention. In the elec-

tions for office the main contest took place around the vice-chairmanship. The issues involved in this were not clear to the mass of the delegates and revolved mainly around the accusation that Gilbert Harrison, founder of the A.V.C., was a Red-baiter. He denied this, but the narrow margin of his victory, 19,000 to 16,500, proved that he failed to convince a great many delegates. It remains to be seen whether Harrison will live up to his pledge. There are already disturbing post-convention signs that the dominant circles in the national leadership are moving to fire personnel for political reasons.

Bolte was elected chairman without opposition and with but one dissenting vote. A national planning committee of 24 was elected, consisting roughly of one-third rich men's sons with a liberal outlook and with ties to the Wallace Democrats and Stassen Republicans, one-third mixed *New Republic* and New Deal liberals and Social-Democratic friends of Reuther, Dubinsky and Carey, and one-third tied up with the independent political action forces represented by N.C.P.A.C., I.C.C., etc. If the leadership of the A.V.C. can unite around a bold program of struggle both for the needs of veterans and for the general good of the nation, direct its appeal to the mass of the veterans, and defeat the efforts of the few professional anti-Communist disrupters in the leadership to set the A.V.C. on the same sterile path as the reactionary Red-

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baiting leaders of the Legion and the V.F.W., then the A.V.C. indeed has a great future before it. The A.V.C. must stretch out its hand to the *entire* labor movement, to the Amvets with which there are even possibilities of merger, and to united action with the millions of veterans in the Legion and the V.F.W., who have an entirely different outlook from that of their own reactionary leaders. An A.V.C. of hundreds of thousands of members, playing the above role, will be a major influence in allying the veterans with the labor movement, in countering the reactionary policies of the major veteran organizations, and in stimulating rank-and-file movements within those organizations.

It must never be overlooked, however, that there are at present two million World War II veterans in the American Legion and one million in the V.F.W. These veterans do not share the outlook of the en-

trenched bureaucratic leadership of their organizations, who are primarily interested in carrying out the anti-democratic program of monopoly capital, and must not be left at their mercy. Every effort must be made to collaborate with the rank-and-file of these organizations, who will increasingly come into conflict with the bureaucracy (as many of the State Encampments of the Legion and V.F.W. already show) and to do everything possible to stimulate such movements. Progressive-minded veterans, especially trade union veterans, should follow the lead of the Communist veterans. Just as they fought on all fronts and in all branches of the armed forces, so Communist veterans are increasingly active in *all* veterans' organizations, including, and not least of all, the Legion and V.F.W., and seek to unite all veterans in the struggle for security, democracy and peace, and against reaction.