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NOTES ON OUR DISCUSSION

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We have come a long way in the discussion since we first began debating the class nature of the East-European states, and every one of us has undoubtedly learned something from it. It is not too much to say that the discussion and resultant re-orientation has saved our movement a crisis, has wrenched us out of the ungainly posture of rejecting and denying world-shaking revolutionary developments, because the world was not moving in strict accordance with our programmatic norms and prescriptions.

The discussion has accomplished very much. We are approaching solid agreement on our evaluation of Stalinism, on the specific character of the present period, on our general world perspectives, on the broad tactical lines of work. We have a common viewpoint on the Yugoslav and Chinese revolutions, which we have now incorporated into our political analysis. We have agreement on the nature of the colonial revolutions, and our attitude towards them. We are arriving at agreement on the line-ups and character of the coming war, and our strategic positions and tasks. We are apparently in rough agreement on what has happened and what is happening in the Kremlin's Satellites in Eastern Europe, although the question of the correct definition, as well as a number of subordinate points, remain to be cleared up. (This article does not concern itself with our standing differences with the Johnson group.) All in all, the discussion has been a most fruitful one.

This re-orientation of our movement, this concretization of our tasks must be a source of great satisfaction to all of us. Because, by it, we have gotten back into the world of politics, and shut the door on the insulated domain of doctrinaires, where the battle-cry is: "Long live justice, though the world may perish." For, if the Shachtmanite cadre faces the imminent danger of total disintegration under the hammer blows of Bourgeois and Social Democratic public opinion, our cadre faces an opposite danger, (although, as this discussion has demonstrated, an admittedly remote one,) Our cadre, in its anxiety to steel itself against the pressures of a hostile world, faces a possible danger of petrification, of inuring itself to the play of criticism upon the organization, of people getting closed minds and adopting the attitudes of a shut-in-circle, of converting the writings of the Marxist masters into Scripture, of reducing Marxism to scholasticism.

The discussion, taken as a whole, proved that our movement can react like a living organism and correct itself in the course of discussion and work, and that is a great token for the future. The general line of the Theses on International Perspectives, rounded out with a number of amendments, should provide a solid groundwork in the period ahead.

The purpose of this article is to examine further a number of important items still left dangling in the discussion, or on which there is, as yet, no agreement, and finally, to consider certain tactical problems of the Socialist Workers Party.

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Definition of Stalinism

Agreement has been hammered out again on what Stalinism actually and precisely is, and how to fight it. But we are not yet agreed on a satisfactory definition. The international theses states that the Communist Parties are not "exactly reformist parties." Some leading comrades of our party, however, insist that Stalinism "is a national reformist bureaucracy and an agency of imperialism in the world labor movement."

I don't have the documents at hand, but if memory serves me right, Trotsky originally defined Stalinism as "Bureaucratic Centrism." He replied to critics of the formula, who pointed out that Stalinism was unlike any previous centrism seen in the labor movement, that it was the very essence of centrism to take on different forms, to flip-flop from one extreme to the other, to exhibit itself in the most variegated, kaleidoscopic patterns and hues. After the Spanish events, I believe it was, Trotsky declared that the old formula was outlived, that Stalinism had become the most reactionary force inside the labor movement. The Second World Congress undertook to further define Stalinism in the light of the war and post-war experiences. The 1948 theses declared that "the Stalinist parties have become neo-reformist parties," with this as the reasoning behind the definition: "Just as the old reformist parties endeavor to reconcile the existence of the labor bureaucracy with that of the national bourgeoisie, so the Stalinist parties attempt to reconcile the existence of the Soviet bureaucracy with that of the world bourgeoisie."

The explanation is faulty, and the analogy tends to muddle the problem rather than clarify it. It is incorrect to say that the traditional labor bureaucracy is reformist because it wants to reconcile its own existence with that of the bourgeoisie. We call the traditional labor bureaucracy reformist because it advocates a program of reforming capitalism, of achieving Socialism or the "welfare state," by means of gradual reforms. Because it tries to reconcile the labor movement to capitalism -- that makes the old labor bureaucracy an agency of capitalism inside the labor movement, or as DeLeon aptly called the labor skates, "labor lieutenants of the capitalist class."

The Kremlin, in contrast, operates with no fixed or generalized ideology in the capitalist world, even to the extent of Social Democracy. It is completely opportunistic and demagogic. Its "Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism" covers any and all evils. It is an advocate not only of reformism, but in its time has beat the drums for right-wing capitalism, authoritarianism, jingoism, united fronts and coalitions with Fascists and Monarchists, pacifism, anti-imperialism, ultra-leftism, adventurism, putchism, anything and everything which might give the Kremlin some paltry advantage in its diplomatic maneuvers. A correct definition cannot be constructed by fastening on one feature of Stalinism, and ignoring other equally vital traits.

Does the analogy hold, at least, so far as denominating Stalinism as an agency of imperialism? This formula is not accurate either. The justification for considering the reformist bureaucracy as an agency of capitalism and imperialism inside the labor

movement lies in the fact that the traditional bureaucracy is enduringly tied to its capitalist masters, and that loyalty to the existing system forms the very warp and woof of its activities. The old-line bureaucrats, it is true, are often thrust into episodic conflicts with groups of capitalists, or sometimes even with the whole capitalist class. But these remain episodes which never affect their fundamental course and role. The reformist bureaucracy has never undertaken a mortal conflict with capitalism. It only assumes the leadership of big class struggles under compulsion, and then only to behead them, or abruptly halt them in return for some secondary concessions.

The Stalinist bureaucrats are not the same. Since they are tied to the Kremlin oligarchy, and not to their national capitalists, they do not have the reformists' inhibitions with regard to capitalism or imperialism. In two exceptional cases, Stalinist bureaucracies led successful revolutions. At present, they have assumed the leadership of the anti-imperialist struggle in Korea, Indo-China, Malaya. Critics may reply: "This can change overnight. Stalin will sell out, or try to sell out all these struggles in a minute, if he can get a deal, or half a deal with Washington." Absolutely right. That is why Stalinism is the counter-revolutionary force that it is. But these conflicts with capitalism, this leadership of mass struggles against imperialism, are not episodic to the Kremlin's fundamental tie to imperialism. They are the wild gyrations stemming from the Kremlin's attempt to balance itself by maneuvering between world revolution and world imperialism. Yes, the Kremlin would like a new modus vivendi with imperialism.. But that is only one side of its concrete activities. The other side involves the fact that it is not a complete master of the mass struggles it provokes, or heads. By its adventurist lurchings, by its desperate maneuvers and attempts to blackmail imperialism, it not only disorients and betrays workers' struggles, but also smashes in capitalism here and there, as it did in Eastern Europe, and helps incite great revolutionary storms elsewhere, which then have a meaning and a momentum of their own.

Try as one might, therefore, it is difficult to see how clarity is served, or how anything is added to the wisdom of the ages, by calling the Indo-Chinese or North Korean Stalinists, agents of imperialism; or by explaining that the third world war will be fought, in great part, between imperialism on the one side, and the agents of imperialism on the other. Stalinism is so unlike the old labor bureaucracy, it is such a new, complex, contradictory phenomenon, it is not difficult to see why the old definitions do not fit too satisfactorily. That is why it would appear that a summary descriptive definition would be the best. I would simply define Stalinism as the world agency of the counter-revolutionary, nationalist-minded Kremlin oligarchy. This label does not pretend to supply an exhaustive analysis of Stalinism, but at least it is accurate as far as it goes. Further explanations can be made in the analysis, and do not have to be all contained in the definitions itself.

The Criterion For A Workers State

There are still some differences, or nuances, on what is the correct criterion to determine the class nature of a state. It is instructive to pursue this question once again in the light of the recent problems, as the discussion illumines aspects of our traditional Russian position, as well as of general Marxian theory.

To begin with, what is a Workers' State from the standpoint of the Marxist program? I would define a Workers State as one in which a revolution has taken place, sociologically speaking. In other words, where real power, that means political and economic power, has shifted from the capitalists to the workers and their allies. Under conditions of civilization, naturally, this shift of power is recorded by new class laws, decrees, government institutions, armed forces, and ownership of property, in a word, by new class or property relations.

In the USSR, as Trotsky taught us over and over again, the workers lost their political power -- indeed, their political rights -- but the socio-economic foundations of the Workers' State remained. And this matter of property is so fundamental, that given these foundations, the USSR is still a Workers State, although, of course, a badly diseased one. In the Satellite states, the workers never lost political power because they never won it. The destruction of capitalist property and the introduction of new property forms was carried through in this case by bureaucratic means. But sociologically -- and only sociologically -- power has shifted from one class to another. That is why these states are Workers States, although, again as in the case of the USSR, they are caricatures of a healthy Workers State.

A number of comrades have hastened to call attention to the fact that in 1917 we allegedly applied a different criterion, that when the Bolshheviks took power, we considered Russia a Workers State, even though nationalization of industry did not occur until nine months later, and other tasks of the proletarian revolution were not carried through until even a longer period had elapsed. They maintain that at that time the proletarian revolution was our criterion; that in that case, at least, the so-called political criterion was the decisive one.

Based on this incorrect conclusion, two schools of thought have emerged, both wrong. One maintains that since the so-called political criterion is the decisive one, and since it does not fully apply to Yugoslavia ("the genuine organs of workers' power, the freely elected Soviets and mass organizations are yet to appear"), that country is not a Workers State. The other school, beginning with the same premise that the so-called political criterion is the decisive one, concludes that since the "bodies of armed men" of the old classes have been destroyed in Yugoslavia, the Satellites, China, they are all of them Workers States, even though bourgeois relations may still predominate in China.

The error here consists of a misunderstanding of the criterion applied in 1917. Marxists considered Russia a Workers State after

the Bolshevik victory not because they thought that Lenin and Trotsky, plus Soviets and "bodies of armed men," was the equivalent of social and economic power passing into the hands of the working class, or that the so-called political criterion was the determinant, but because they correctly assumed that the political victory made inevitable the socio-economic one, and that the full social revolution could be halted only in the event of triumphant counter-revolution. What they did, in other words, was to telescope the process, to take for granted that the political leadership of the revolution would carry through the necessary historical tasks to crush the old classes and consolidate the workers' victory. Thus, the political revolution was not the criterion, except in popular parlance; although, the fact that it was a genuine proletarian revolution did make unnecessary laborious applications of any other criteria.

Now, it is obvious that the same yardstick cannot be applied to Yugoslavia or China, and certainly not to the Satellite countries, that was employed for Soviet Russia in 1917. There exists, in all these instances, a sharp contradiction between the leadership, and the tasks of the revolution. In the case of Yugoslavia and China, we are confronted with an opportunist leadership which maneuvers with the plebeian masses, and which pushes through the revolutionary tasks under the pressure of external events. In the case of the Kremlin overlords in Eastern Europe, this contradiction between the leadership and the revolutionary tasks is of an acute nature, and the overturn was executed not only under the impact of the cold war with the West, but by bureaucratic-military means to boot.

It is impermissible, therefore, to telescope events in these three situations, and hold that the political victory under Tito, Mao, or outright Stalinist agents necessarily spells the expropriation of the bourgeoisie and the institution of proletarian property relations. In these abnormal cases, we can only determine the existence of a Workers State after the event, as it were, when power has actually passed into the hands of a new class, as signaled by the existence of new property relations. The criterion, we can therefore say, is the same in all cases. But the method of determining it necessarily varies, especially when confronted with bastardized and diseased manifestations.

With this as our key, we call Yugoslavia a Workers State; we call the five East-European countries Workers States, though Dependencies of the Kremlin; but, in the case of China, a transitional definition like Workers and Farmers Government is more in order, even though we may conclude in a year or two that new property relations have by then been established, and that China therefore fits into the same sociological category as the others. (I don't think the last formula applied to the transition in Eastern Europe, but have dealt with this in a previous bulletin.)

One can insist, of course, that the programmatic norm contemplated a Workers' State issuing out of a proletarian revolution; and while, at long last, prepared to recognize the reality of the destruction of capitalism in East Europe, one can still refuse, by God, to honor these monstrosities with the same designation as the USSR, which at least had its origin in a glorious revolution. Others then, with equal justice, can, and as a matter of fact, do insist that

before they will recognize any Workers States, they have to issue not only from proletarian revolutions, but only those that fully live up to the programmatic norm, and not those in sharp divergence from it. All this boils down to the fact that the old Marxist terminology did not foresee and provide for the many degenerated, repulsive forms that workers' struggles, and even successes have assumed. We have no alternative as Marxists but to recognize the reality, and proceed to adapt the old terminology to the new developments, as Trotsky repeatedly did in his time; unless someone is prepared to publish a political dictionary replete with brand new scientific definitions of all the unforeseen phenomena of the past decade or two, and all the new variations that we are likely to confront in the immediate years ahead.

This discussion of Marxist criteria, categories and definitions does not, it goes without saying, gainsay the fact that Marxists take their point of departure from the class struggle, from an analysis of the actual class forces, and do not consider property relations in isolation from classes and their inter-relationships. But a specific problem often has to be isolated from the whole and even treated statically for purposes of analysis. Such a technique has high standing not only in biology, or geology, but also in Scientific Socialism. Were this not so, whole chapters of Marx's Capital would have to be tossed into the stove.

* * *

Centrist Parties.

The Proletarian Revolution, and the Transitional Period

Far from the elimination of the old order proceeding in a rigid, fixed, unchanging manner all over the world, we have already witnessed the destruction of capitalism by bureaucratic-military means in a number of countries in Eastern Europe, in the course of a bastardized revolution in Yugoslavia, and in the process of destruction through a different variation of an equally bastardized revolution in China. While it is incorrect to view any one of these as disclosing the pattern of the road to power in the rest of the world, as the circumstances in all three cases were quite exceptional, it is probable, just the same, that history will reveal to us several more unique forms before "the final conflict." It is clear, however, on the face of it, that the possibilities for overturns in other countries by military-bureaucratic means are severely limited, that they can be envisaged in a few countries only, if at all, in the course of Red Army occupation in the next world war. On the other hand, the Yugoslav and Chinese revolutions, despite their unique characteristics, do pose very pointedly the question whether opportunist centrist parties cannot lead revolutions to victory; in other words, whether our traditional stand on this question is not due for some considerable modification.

Trotskyism, in the wake of its Marxist predecessors, always gave decisive weight to the necessity of the subjective factor in realizing revolutionary victory. Trotskyism held that while the masses might, in exceptional circumstances, take power through the

sheer momentum and sweep of the onslaught, without a revolutionary leadership, they could not hold power, much less consolidate it, unless headed by a Bolshevik-type of leadership. The indispensibility of a conscious leadership has indeed been underlined again by the post-war experiences, both in the successes and failures. But history has proven itself a little more flexible, a little less intransigent than our theory. Where the disintegration of the old ruling classes was proceeding apace, as in Yugoslavia and China, it was able to utilize -- in the absence of Marxist parties -- opportunist, less-than-Marxist working class parties to direct the revolutionary offensive, to secure the victory, and then to carry through some of the historical tasks of the revolution.

Can the process be repeated elsewhere; and how does this affect the role of our movement? We cannot predict all coming events like soothsayers. But we do know some things. We know the world has shrunk enormously in the past few decades, and that the United States has emerged out of the last slaughter as the sole remaining solvent capitalist power, and as the irreplaceable prop for capitalism the world over. It is idle to speculate on the exact manner in which capitalism will perish in this or that country, or whether additional deformed manifestations may not be exhibited in other exceptional circumstances. It requires no elaborate proof, however, that American capitalism, and very likely, its main imperialist allies, cannot be reduced except by a volcanic uprising of its masses at home. Revolutionary mastery will not come here by default, or the virtual crumbling of the enemy. It will be won in desperate struggle, with victory as the consequence, only on the premise that a competent revolutionary leadership stands at the head of the insurgent people.

What is therefore required is to broaden out and impart greater historical perspective and breadth to our old formula of the necessity of a conscious Marxist leadership to guarantee and consolidate the revolutionary victory; not to narrow it down to the developments inside one single country, but to see it from a world viewpoint, and from the perspective of the world revolution. The tasks of the world revolution, properly understood, consist not only of the destruction of capitalism and imperialism, but the extirpation of the Stalinist tyranny in its domains, as well; to remove the dead hand of this avaricious, reactionary oligarchy, and thereby enable the working classes everywhere to proceed freely and efficiently with the solution of the transition tasks of this epoch. Within this broadened framework -- and it should not be palmed off as the identical idea of yesterday -- the formula retains its validity, and adequately explains the historical necessity for our international movement.

As for the time interval of the transition period, and the various forms it may assume, and the various struggles it may produce -- it is difficult to see that clearly into the future. The definitive destruction of capitalism however, does not appear, so far as we can tell, to be a matter of centuries.

A historical analogy suggests itself here between the modern movement and the destruction of feudalism. If we date the start of this overturn from the British revolution of 1640, and its essential completion with the unification of Germany and Italy in 1870, we would conclude that the historic process stretched over two centuries,

and that after the British overturn, over 135 years elapsed before the next major revolutionary developments took place in America and France. If we, in a parallel column, date the beginning of capitalism's destruction from 1917 (the deed), and not 1848 (the program), we can conclude that already, in the course of some three decades, despite terrible defeats, the revolutionary masses succeeded in wiping out capitalism in a portion of the globe comprising roughly a third of the total population. If we add to this fact our general knowledge that all social processes are enormously speeded up today in comparison to a century or two ago, that this is an age of revolution, with one rapidly following on the heels of the other, that capitalism already is a wounded beast staggering from crisis to crisis, and that the world hovers again on the brink of another world war; if we add up all this, then the evidence seems strong that capitalism as a world system must measure its existence in decades rather than centuries.

Be that as it may, our own historic vindication will come to the measure that we succeed in becoming leaders of masses in action, that we fuse the Marxist ideology with the mass movement. That is why this discussion necessarily turns from analysis of the world reality and the general perspectives to a discussion of tactics, to how we can increase our influence and grow strong. In tune with this general development of the discussion, we will conclude these notes with a consideration of some tactical problems of the Socialist Workers Party.

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The Americanization of the SWP

Several months ago our committee decided to drop the designation of "Trotskyist" from our general literature and to discontinue running the pictures of Lenin and Trotsky in every issue of the paper. This decision, long overdue, is to be heartily applauded as part of the process of the Americanization of our party, of the elimination of all externals which are unnecessary roadblocks in our path. What is now required is that this practical adjustment in our propaganda be generalized into a conscious and planned orientation.

Our movement has not, so far, made the impact on American political life of the revolutionary currents that preceded us. We haven't left the mark on the American working class that the IWW or the Debs Socialists did. We are still looked upon, more than some realize, as a group of hero-worshippers, personal adherents of Leon Trotsky, as a sect of eccentrics. Even many sophisticated labor militants friendly to us, (and they are all getting pretty sophisticated nowadays) view Trotskyism not just as a political program that is too extreme, or with which they cannot go along, but as something of an oddity, something that is foreign, far-away, alien to America and its problems.

Our movement has not been unaware of this unfortunate impression conveyed by us, and we have made a number of valiant efforts to Americanize the party, to adjust our tone and manners to the American scene, and make it part of the stream of the native labor movement. The policy of proletarianization, executed in campaign fashion in

1940, certainly can be considered, in a broad political sense, as an attempt to Americanize our movement. We tried to turn our backs on the petty bourgeois literati, and place our members in such an intimate relationship to the working class, that our primary attention would, of necessity, be riveted on the solution of the actual problems of workers in the shops; of having the thinking, the feeling, the pre-occupation, the very composition of the party so intimately reflect the workers' aspirations and sufferings, moods and struggles, that we would become the vanguard in practice that we proclaimed ourselves to be in theory.

Our efforts along this line were mirrored for ten years in energetic activities in strike struggles and union affairs, in the changed character of our press; and epitomized, as it were, in the work around the Minneapolis case, and even more so, in the 1948 election campaign. Here, we made the most integrated and heroic effort to present ourselves to the American people in understandable terms, to relate our movement to a known revolutionary tradition, and to relate our ideas to the daily problems of the masses.

There is no question that our party has transformed itself in many respects in the ten-year period; that our party understands, reflects and participates in the American labor movement far better than was the case in the past. But we are still a long way from being a party of mass action. And we are still a long way from erasing our heritage of an isolated propaganda sect. This is due, in the main, not to faulty techniques, or mistaken tactics, but to formidable social obstructions which it was not in the cards for us to overcome in the past.

We emerged as an organization in America out of a split in Russia that the American workers, and even their most advanced elements, knew little about and cared less. We had to build a cadre in a fight for an international program in isolation from the labor movement and its life-giving struggles. We had to pit our tiny membership in the industrial unions against the far-flung Stalinist battle formations, as well as against the strongest reformist bureaucracy of the whole capitalist world, with a working class in the grip of Rooseveltianism. We had to brave the full fury of a demonic witch-hunt before we could sufficiently entrench ourselves in the American labor movement. Yes, this party had to be built the hard way.

But it is not sufficient to explain our defects, shortcomings, and failures of the past and present. We have to look to the future, and make sure that we leave no stone unturned to prepare ourselves for the next round of struggle, to make sure that it doesn't pass us by the way the CIO did. Especially so, since we are not going to build a party in this country without plenty of competition, not only from the present labor bureaucracy, and even the Stalinists, but also, very likely, from new pseudo-revolutionary or pseudo-Socialist formations.

There will be no victories won by default in the U.S.A. Although the proletarian advance is inevitable, our organization will have successes only as it measures up to the requirements of the times. That is why we cannot afford any sectarianism. We cannot afford

to live in the past, or in a make-believe world of our own creation. We cannot afford any Quixotism. While our program is based, and will continue to be based upon the international experiences of the working class; and while Trotsky was, in the immediate and most direct sense, the teacher and the leader of our movement, it does not at all follow from these two propositions that we will have much success in rallying workers to our banner by trying to straighten them out on the rights and wrongs of the Stalin-Trotsky fight, which has now receded into history -- or that it is our revolutionary duty to try to do so. Paying homage to the memory of a great man is not our main task as a political party. We will vindicate Trotsky's struggle -- and our own -- by becoming a force; and in no other way. And we will become a force only when we succeed in implanting ourselves into the consciousness of the working class of this country as an authentic and indigenous band of American revolutionary militants.

"The style is the man," Buffon wrote. And the style of an organization is a true index of its real character and makeup. Every revolutionary movement must have the correct answers to the problem of the times, and must know how to make itself heard. There is no easy cookbook recipe that can be written out on how to properly mix the ingredients in just the right proportions. Once we grasp the importance of the question, however, and do not either pooh-pooh the matter, or accept it in principle in order to forget about it in practice, we will know how to implement the orientation in a practical way, as we go along.

These lines do not imply that this is a Sesame which will open all doors. Clearly, this is no new revelation; and much has already been accomplished. But we suffer so many relapses into our former habits, many still labor under so many parochial notions in this field, we are so loaded down with false obligations; and above all, our organization still continues to make such a bizarre impression on people we must attract, that a planned and deliberate orientation to complete the next phase of the Americanization of our movement -- and the word is used in its broadest implications -- is now necessary to lay the foundations for future successes, just as our proletarianization effort in 1940 was indispensable for our integration into the broad labor movement, and such successes as we were able to have in the intervening decade.

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This orientation demands a re-examination of every department of our party activity, and its improvement and strengthening from this point of view. Our theoretical magazine, however, occupies a special place in relation to our work, and has a special function to perform. As I conceive it, the theoretical magazine has the high duty of keeping the thinking of our cadre sharp and clear, and of breaking new ground in Marxist thought and development by following and analyzing all the new problems, trends and experiences of our epoch, especially as they relate to America.

Any tendency to make the magazine more acceptable, or to increase its sales here and there, by converting it into what would essentially be an elaborated version of the Militant appears to me as

incorrect; it would simply result in an unnecessary duplication of effort. The more we popularize our weekly press and literature, the more skilled we become in talking in understandable terms and in resting on an American tradition -- the more will we need a theoretical organ which will preserve and continue the Marxist tradition, and which will serve as a true guide to the movement on all questions, from the heights of theory to the tactical problems of the day. As Marxism grows more influential and accepted, the magazine will get a broader hearing. But it can only justify its existence -- and it should form an essential and honored part of our structure -- by more authoritatively fulfilling its role of defender of the science of Socialism against all its traducers, and by applying the science to theoretically solve the social problems of our lifetime.

* * *

We are all aware that this country is entering a new stormy decade, and that great changes are in the offing in the political and social climate. It has often been said that we will have many opportunities. That is our conviction. But our future growth depends on our readiness to seize opportunities offered. No automatic process is in operation which guarantees our successes. There is no benign God, in the guise of History, who will see that equal and exact justice is meted out, and that we will be duly recompensed for our sacrifices and exertions. We will grow and succeed as we are able to meet the tests and needs of the period. That is why the re-arming of our movement all along the line is both welcome and necessary.

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