

# James P. Cannonism

By Owen Gager

**[From *Spartacist: A Marxist Journal*, Vol. 3 No.1. 1973. TRANSCRIBER'S NOTE: This journal should NOT be confused with the *Spartacist An Organ of Revolutionary Marxism*, the theoretical journal of the Spartacist League (SL). *Spartacist: A Marxist Journal* had no relationship with the SL except for a very brief period. It's politics and program are not that of the SL and in no way reflect the SL's politics.**

There has been along argument in the American Trotskyist movement over what went wrong, and when, with the longest standing American party claiming to be Trotskyist, the Socialist Worker's Party. This argument is now spreading far beyond the original small groups of American Trotskyists who began it, as it becomes clear that the Socialist Workers' Party has moved and is moving to the right even of the discredited Stalinist, hopelessly pro-Soviet, American Communist Party, and its trying to push the Mandelist Fourth International to more and more reformist positions, as shown in the political practice of the N.Z. Socialist Action League.

The argument as it has so far developed centres around personalities far more than around ideas. James P. Cannon, the undisputed leader of the SWP at the time of Trotsky's death in 1940, has retained his role as leader of the party until the present day, though as he has grown older more and more authority has been assumed by his supporter and co-thinker Joseph Hansen. Cannon enjoyed Trotsky's blessing as leader of the party, yet Cannon went wrong – or so American “anti-revisionist” groups like the Spartacist and Workers' Leagues see the situation.

They ask why Cannon went wrong and find the answer partly in the divisions of labour within the Party before Trotsky's death; where Cannon was the Party's main organiser and Shachtman, who left the SWP in 1940 because he believed the Soviet Union was “State Capitalist”, its main theoretician. They claim that this division of labour should never have been allowed to grow up, and allowed Cannon to make theoretical errors later. It is also argued that in the discussion in 1953 in the Fourth International around Pabloism, the view that the colonial revolution of that period was the ‘epicentre’ of world revolution. Cannon failed to take a stand against Pablo until Pablo won support in the SWP. Cannon's attitude, it was claimed, was “provincial”.

Attention is thus focussed on Cannon's leadership and its deficiencies, rather than on the ideology of the Party, and the effect on that ideology of the Party's Social environment. The view that Cannon, as an individual, was responsible for the degeneration of the SWP is a

version of the “great men make history” idealist methodology used to explain, of all things, revisionism in the Trotskyist movement.

A critique of revisionism, which fails to examine the historical development of theory as a guide to action cannot explain revisionism because it accepts rather than explains the gulf between theory and practice in an allegedly Marxist party. To argue this is not to deny that the criticisms so far made of Cannon do not point to *symptoms* of revisionism within the SWP. But it does insist that the discussion so far has been about the symptoms of the revisionist disease, not the disease itself.

The reason why the so-called “anti-revisionist” groupings in the United States have not examined the growth of a Cannonist theory of the SWP is simple: *they also share in the support of, and elaboration of, this theory.*

These “anti-revisionist” groupings defend Cannon’s refusal to heed Trotsky’s advice, after the split with Shachtman, that the Party headquarters should be moved from the petty-bourgeois intellectual milieu of New York to a working class centre like Detroit. In fact their headquarters remain, to this day, like the SWP’s, in New York. They refuse to demand of their own petty-bourgeois members the systematic recruitment of working class cadres as a condition of membership, as also demanded in **In Defense of Marxism**.

The SL/US claims exemption from Trotsky’s organisational principles on the ground that it is a “propaganda group” where the SWP after 1941 was a “party” – ignoring the fact that the SWP was too weak even to stand candidates in the 1941 elections and was in fact more or less reduced to the status of a propaganda group by the split with Shachtman (as Robertson and Ireland have virtually admitted in their document *The Centralism of the SWP and the Tasks of the Minority* in **The SWP – Revolutionary or Centrist**, p.19. This attitude even if it were based on fact could only represent the rottenest organisational fetishism.

The SL/WL and SWP, also *all* adhere to one document. The central and major Cannonist theoretical document, representing the SWP’s main orientation after the death of Trotsky, the *Theses on the American Revolution* (published together with an explanatory speech by Cannon, under the title of **The Coming American Revolution**). This article will examine this document in detail. What must be pointed out here is that this document represents not only the political takeoff point of departure the SWP as it now exists, but is also the avowed point of departure for the main *critique* of later SWP policy, **In Defense of a Revolutionary Perspective**, which the present leaderships of both the Spartacist and Workers Leagues accept as defining their basic position. To criticise the *Theses* is to attack all the major American Trotskyist groupings.

It is easy to see why the *Theses* have been regarded by ‘anti-revisionists’ as a document embodying their position. Thesis 9, on the relation between revolution in the colonial world and revolution in the industrialised centres of the world, could not have been endorsed by

Pablo during the controversy leading up to the 1953 split in the Fourth International. It reads: “The revolutionary upheavals of the European proletariat which lie ahead, will complement, reinforce and accelerate the revolutionary developments in the US. The liberationist (sic) struggles of the colonial peoples (sic) against imperialism which are unfolding before our eyes will exert a similar influence. Conversely, each blow dealt by the American proletariat to the imperialists at home will stimulate, supplement and intensify the revolutionary struggles in Europe and the colonies. Every reversal, suffered by imperialism anywhere will, in turn, produce ever greater repercussions in this country generating such speed and power as will tend to reduce all time intervals both at home and abroad.”

In the conflict between Pablo and Healy the *Theses* supported orthodoxy against revisionism, Healy against Pablo. The *Theses* formulated the position to which Cannon remained loyal when Pablo challenged it in 1953. Cannon’s loyalty to this position, and the SWP’s adoption of it were, however, basically unreflecting carryings on of the traditions of Marxist Internationalism. The position of the *Theses*, a position on the strategy and tactics of the international movement, was only counterposed to the Pabloist line internationally after, and owing to, the emergence of a Pabloist opposition to the internal regime in the SWP. Internationalism was luxury; the SWP allowed itself only during internal organisational emergencies.

Moreover, even the 1946 expression of ‘orthodoxy’ had its limitations as Robertson and Wohlforth should have observed but did not. It is silent on the question of the leadership of the colonial revolution and the working class party in exactly the same way as Pablo was and is – a position whose meaning is expressed unambiguously in the SWP’s present “out now” perspective with its silence on the role of the Vietnamese working class and Vietnamese Stalinism. The resolution already, foreshadowed the ‘platonic internationalism’ against which Cannon thundered rhetorically but to which he capitulated politically.

The central theme of the *Theses* – thesis 10’s declaration that “the role of America”, not the American working class or even its Marxist party, but American sans phrase, “in the world is decisive” – is the real measure of its retreat from internationalism. Trotsky, it is true, underscored the fact that without revolutions in the industrialised West, the workers revolution elsewhere had no option but to retreat. But in certain circumstances this “orthodoxy” could be a cover for national chauvinism, for a glorification of the *American* working class’s special role, and it was in terms of this reading of orthodoxy that Cannon’s alignment with Healy against Pablo in 1953 should be read.

For this is the meaning of the *Theses on the American Revolution*. The *Theses* begin with the, as it turned out quite wrong, perspective that “the blind alley in which world capitalism has arrived, and the US with it, excludes a new organic era of capitalist stabilisation”. Stabilisation is the name for what happened to American capitalism in the post-1945 years. But whatever the limitations of the SWP’s view of the years immediately following 1946, the

last decade has shown it was strategically justified in declaring that “American capitalism, hitherto only partially involved in the death agony of capitalism as a world system, is henceforth subject to the full and direct impact of all the forces and contradictions that have debilitated the old capitalist countries of Europe”. The *Theses* contrasted the American with the German bourgeoisie and claimed that more stood in the way of an American “organisation of the world” than the German – in immediate terms, a false prediction, based on an even more false analogy, since America, unlike Germany, did not need Fascism to provide here bourgeoisie with a world empire.

But given that all these predictions led to a claim that America was headed for a return to a slump worse than conditions in the ‘thirties, it was clear that America would lose her role as ‘organiser of the world’ so quickly, and her period as Chief imperialist power would be of such short duration, that any claim that ‘the role of America in the world is decisive’, whether this applied to the bourgeoisie or the working class, had to be wrong.

This totally ‘pessimistic’ evaluation of American imperialism was quite incompatible with the SWP’s total ‘optimistic’ evaluation of the American working class. The proud words of the *Theses*, that “Wall Street’s war drive, aggravating the social crisis, may under certain conditions actually precipitate it”, though they ring hollowly after the epoch of Korea and McCarthyism (and stand in total conflict with Lenin’s condemnation of the 1912 Socialist International resolution) invalidate the later claim that if “the European or colonial revolutions ... precede in point of time the *culmination* of the struggle in the US, they would immediately be confronted with the necessity of defending their conquests against the economic and military attacks of the American imperialist monster”. (Emphasis ours).

On the arguments of the *Theses*, the objective conditions were such that an American imperialist war might be prevented without revolution; and if this was so, it was just not true that “the decisive battles of the communist future will be fought in the US”. It certainly could not be true if a second coming of a new world slump would reduce America to the level of the European capitalist states, and deprive her of her defences against the speedy disintegration of the world capitalist economy. There was only one reason why these battles should be prophesied for America and America alone – social patriotism.

The prediction of a new slump, the *Theses* ultra-pessimism about capitalism, served to justify their ultra-optimism about American workers. Because conditions would grow worse even than the level of the ‘thirties, it would case to be true as the 1938 **Transitional Programme** had declared that the more prosperous upper strata of workers would in a revolutionary situation act as a brake on the movement. “The widely held view that high wages are a conservatising factor is one-sided and false”, proclaimed the *Theses* using Cannon’s deep economic analysis to refuse the political programme of Trotsky. “This holds true”, according to the *Theses*, “only under conditions of capitalist stability”. The high wages of the American workers would disappear, and this would force high-paid workers into

revolutionary consciousness because despite what Lenin claimed, trade union consciousness spontaneously generates working class political consciousness

To claim that consciousness develops out of objective circumstances, without the intervention of the revolutionary party, as subject, was to take the position later described as Pabloism. In this form, however, it had an older name *economism*. Not only was American capitalism, unlike British imperialism or Monopoly capital of any kind as Lenin described it, not capable of bribing a section of the working class with super profits so creating a labour aristocracy, but also it had ceased to try to divide workers by race and nationality!

“Masses of Negroes”, it was said, “have since the ‘twenties penetrated into the basic industries and into the unions. It was beyond the American revolutionary Marxist vanguard party to realise that once all the white GIs came back from the war the black workers would be out of the factories and back on the streets again, even though the SWP was predicting for America the greatest slump in its entire history. This entry of the Negroes onto the “front lines of progressiveness and militancy” showed the “cohesiveness and homogeneity” of a working class still haunted by racial prejudice. More, the “Americanization” of foreign-born workers – the same phenomenon which was in the ‘fifties to be the fertile soil for McCarthyism – was viewed as an asset to the revolutionary movement.

Optimism by itself is a dubious blessing for a serious Marxist Movement, especially when reinforced by economism. The *Theses* main argument against the ‘superficial’ view that the ‘backwardness’ of American workers might ‘postpone’ the revolution, was that in a brief decade the American workers attained trade union consciousness on a higher plane and with mightier organisations than in any other advanced country. What the SWP had to learn was that trade union consciousness does not automatically generate political consciousness – and it is a lesson, which the SWP are still learning. It was precisely in the slump conditions of 1937 that Trotsky had warned of the conservatising influences of the stronger unions. In a bigger slump on Trotsky’s view, this conservative influence would be stronger. But Cannon knew better than Trotsky or thought he did. History has certainly shown who was right.

As early as 1923, Trotsky was arguing that to *predict* a stabilisation of capitalism did not mean to *welcome* it, and the Marxist case against programmes whose ‘revolutionary’ character derives from a total pessimism about capitalism, and a total optimism about the revolutionary potential of workers is not a new one. One of the things about such programmes is that, when tested in political practice and found wanting, they are almost certainly *inverted*. This is certainly what happened to the 1946 *Theses*.

The higher paid workers moved from their “high level of trade union consciousness” to the political level. However, as expected on the basis of the 1938 **Transitional Programme**, they moved from the world’s most highly bribed labour aristocracy, to a plebian radical rightism, not in conflict with, but the logical deduction from, their purely economic conception of their class’s social role. The SWP, faced with the total bankruptcy of their

programme on this point, abandoned any belief that the workers were in motion, adjusting purely empirically to the failure of their programme instead of questioning the correctness of their basic theory.

Forced to revise their patriotic assumptions about the unparalleled 'homogeneity' of the American working class, they turned towards the very minorities whose incorporation into the working class they had so triumphantly proclaimed, to substitute those *sections* of society – blacks, women, Chicanos, students – for the economist conception of the working class they had originally adhered to. These minorities now emerged as the force that would set off the spark to awaken workers generally into motion. Once the imminent downfall of American capitalism had been announced, some force had to be found to justify the SWP's jeremiads about capitalism's quick demise, and it had to be whatever group that appeared at the moment the most militant, because the SWP had not allowed enough time for the forces of destruction of American capitalism to mature. More than this, to question the reality behind the appearance of non-worker radicalism would be to put in doubt the proposition that the battles of the Communist future were to be fought in America. How ... unpatriotic!

But this position was marginally preferable to that of the 'anti-revisionist' Wohlforth and Robertson groups which, in order to maintain that the SWP's 1946 positions represented orthodoxy, and its later positions revisionism, had to deny that the 1946 *Programme* had failed to meet the test of social reality. The failure to comprehend American reality destined them to the role of sects. Both failed to see the SWP's basic weakness as its surrender to national chauvinism, though they were both capable of seeing in the "Out Now" perspective of the SWP's anti-war work a concession to bourgeois pacifism and liberalism. In an implicit alliance with that pacifism, they did not follow this to its logical conclusion and see that its basis lay in the theory of a 'special role' for the *American* working class, and, therefore, of a special role for America.

The Workers' League's incapacity to grasp the problems of chauvinism led to its surrender, in international relations, to the British chauvinism of Healy's Socialist Labour League, the abandonment of political independence being the only way in which Wohlforth could avoid his own surrender to American chauvinism. The Spartacist League on the other hand, did not struggle at all against American chauvinism, not seeing the existence of the problem even to the extent that Wohlforth did, so that the history of its international relations after its break with Healy is simply a struggle to impose its programme 100% on those groups unfortunate enough to enter into fraternal relations with it.

The Logan group, ex of Wellington, who have now emigrated to Australia, was reduced to a servile group of correspondents with New York, the 'anti-revisionist' mirror image of its 'revisionist' enemies in the Fyson group who follow equally slavishly the American SWP line. The working class economism of Robertson, Wohlforth and Logan is counterposed to the 'youth vanguardist' spontaneism of Hanson and Fyson, a difference which reduces itself

in terms of Russian Bolshevik Party history to the difference between the narrow trade union radicalism of Martynov, and the youth vanguardism of the Social Revolutionaries who preceded Martynov as the chief antagonists of Bolshevism.

Bolshevism remains the line of the 1938 **Transitional Programme** and Trotsky's **Trade Unions in the Epoch of Imperialist Decay**. As the 1938 **Programme** declares, and Cannon's **Coming American Revolution** denies, "As organisations expressive of the top layers of the proletariat trade unions ... develop powerful tendencies towards compromise with the bourgeois democratic regime. In periods of acute class struggle, the leading bodies of the trade unions aim to become masters of the mass movement in order to render it harmless. This is already happening during the period of simple strikes which smash the principle of bourgeois property. In time of war or revolution, the trade union leaders usually become bourgeois ministers. Therefore, the sections of the Fourth International should always strive not only to renew the top leadership of trade unions ... but also to create in all possible instances independent militant organisations corresponding more closely to the tasks of mass struggle against bourgeois society and, if necessary, not flinching in the face of a direct break with the conservative apparatus of the leadership".

Some 'anti-revisionists', with their usual glibness, try to confuse the issue: is the problem the unions or ... the leadership? The answer is clearly stated in Trotsky's **The Unions in Britain**: "the trade unions [not just the leadership] now play not a progressive but a reactionary role".

The section of the **Transitional Programme** quoted above clearly sees that "the top layers of the proletariat" find their natural expression in an apolitical unionism and have themselves a tendency to compromise with the capitalist state. All Cannonites deny this basic fact, from Hansen to Logan. Now, to fight for democracy and independence of the capitalist state, the trade unions can only turn to the Fourth International and its 1938 **Programme**, which alone can, by its political fight, ensure that the economic fight can also be won. Only the party and programme of revolutionary Trotskyism can prevent the unions from subordination to the capitalist state.

The Cannonite subordination of the political struggle to the 'autonomous' economic struggle leads directly to the refusal to use the Party apparatus to fight against both old and new state encroachments on the independence of the unions. The fight for the independence of unions is, after all, the way in which unions are *politicised*, when Cannonites want to do something quite different, to *economise* the Party. Some Cannonites, Logan for example, refuse to fight against the enforcement of union membership by the capitalist state, so supporting unions which can be smashed by the same hand which created them, and giving up the struggle to win workers to unionism by rank and file organisation, militant industrial action and the political programme of Trotskyism. This is where Cannonism and economism lead.

Against this, the words of Trotsky speak clearly: "... [We must] mobilise the masses, not only against the bourgeoisie but also against the totalitarian regime within the trade unions themselves and against the leaders enforcing this regime. The primary slogan for this struggle is complete and unconditional independence of the trade unions in relation to the capitalist state. This means a struggle to turn the trade unions into the organs of the broad exploited masses and not the organs of the labour aristocracy."

And how is this to be done: "In the epoch of imperialist decay the trade unions can be really independent only to the extent that they are conscious of being, in action, the organs of proletarian revolution. In this sense, the program of transitional demands adopted by the last congress of the Fourth International is not only the program for the activity of the Party but ... for activity of the unions." In other words, only by subordinating the economic to the political struggle and recognising the historically decisive force of the Marxist Party, can unions become revolutionary.

As we said in **Red** No.1 *Where we Stand* statement, without the Party, the unions cannot be revolutionary, and only a party based on "Power to the People", that is, on the Leninist concept of peoples' revolution as stated in the Transitional Programme of the Fourth International, can make the unions revolutionary. But 'revolutionary' leadership of a union, without subordination to the leadership to the party and its programme is a parody of Trotskyism; it is this parody Cannon and his friends try to impose on the International