

James P. Cannon on the significance of Independence Day

From Karl Marx to the Fourth of July

James P. Cannon
3 July 2004

We are posting today for the benefit of our readers an article authored by James P. Cannon, published in The Militant on July 16, 1951. Cannon (1890-1974) was a founding member of the Trotskyist movement in the US and a longtime leader of American Trotskyism.

I'm a Fourth of July man from away back, and a great believer in fire crackers, picnics and brass bands to go with it. You can stop me any time and get me to listen to the glorious story of the greatness of our country and how and when it all got started. The continent we inhabit has been here longer than anyone knows—but as a nation, as an independent people, the darlings of destiny favored above all others, we date from the Declaration of Independence and the Fourth of July.

The representatives in Congress assembled 175 years ago were the great initiators. When they said: “We hold these truths to be self-evident,” they started something that opened up a new era of promise for all mankind. That's what I am ready to celebrate any time the bands begin to play—the start and the promise. But nobody can sell me the Fourth of July speeches which represent the start as the finish and the promise as the fulfillment. I quit believing in them a long time ago. As soon as I grew old enough to look around and see what was going on in this country—all the inequality and injustice still remaining—the beneficiaries of privilege, claiming the heritage of our first revolution, struck me as imposters. I recognized the standard Fourth of July orators as phonies, as desecrators of a noble dream. They didn't look like the Liberty Boys of '76.

But that never turned me against the Fourth of July, as was the case with so many American radicals and revolutionists in the past. I thought the Fourth of July belonged to the people. I always regarded its renunciation as one of the biggest mistakes of American radicalism. It is wrong to confuse internationalism with anti-Americanism; to relinquish the revolutionary traditions of

our country to the reactionaries; to let the modern workers' revolutionary movement, the legitimate heir of the men of 1776, appear as something foreign to our country.

That is why it did my heart good to see *The Militant* blossom out this year in a special Fourth of July issue, with its front page manifesto greeting the people of Asia, fighting for their national independence, in the name of our own revolution of 1776—and a whole page of special articles devoted to this revolution and its authentic leaders. The articles in this special issue are obviously the result of serious study and historical research. They throw new light on the most important features of the revolution which have long been obscured, and even deliberately hidden, to serve the special interests of the present-day Tories. These revelations put a powerful propaganda weapon into the hands of those who see in the coming revolution of the American workers not a negation, but a continuation and completion of the revolution for national independence of 175 years ago.

The authors of these remarkable articles were guided in their research by a theory which required them to look for the essential facts and study them in their inter-relationship. They sought to uncover the motive force of the class struggle—the key to the real understanding of all history. The theory which inspired the authors of these articles to study the first American revolution, and guided them in their work, is Marxism—which Congress and the courts would outlaw as a “foreign” doctrine, and the teaching of which in the schools is now virtually prohibited.

The procedure through which these articles in the Fourth of July issue of *The Militant* finally took shape is an interesting story in itself. They are the work of students in our party school of Marxism. We are committed to the proposition that the cadres of our party have a historical task to accomplish. That task is to organize and lead the coming revolution of the American working class. How

better can one prepare to take effective part in such a colossal enterprise than to study the revolution out of which this nation was born? And how can one study revolutionary history seriously and profitably without the aid of the only revolutionary theory of history there is? That's our point of view anyway. And we are serious enough about it to take a group of our leading people of the younger generation out of everyday activity for six months every year to study the history of their country and this "foreign" doctrine which alone explains it.

You will never find two subjects which fit better together. Marx sketched the whole broad outline of American capitalism as it is today in advance of its development. In return for that, American capitalism in all its main features is the crowning proof of Marxism. Our students go to Marx to study America, and study America to verify Marx.

Marxism is a hundred years old, and has been refuted a thousand times by professional pundits. Not satisfied with that, its opponents—who have far more than a scientific interest in the matter—continue to refute Marxism daily, weekly and monthly in all their publications and other mediums of misinformation and miseducation. Our students know all about that, and examine all the refutations conscientiously as part of their study of the doctrine itself. In the course of this examination and counter-examination they become real Marxists. They learn their doctrine thoroughly, and in learning they proceed to apply it. Marxism is not a dogma to be studied for its own sake, but a theory of social evolution and a guide to action in the class struggle. It is not a substitute for the knowledge of concrete reality, past and present, but a theoretical tool for its investigation and interpretation. Our students understand it that way. They went to Marx—and discovered America.

And that, in my opinion, is a very important discovery. We have nothing to do with jingoism, or any kind of vulgar national conceit and arrogance. We are internationalists, and we know very well that our fate is bound up with that of the rest of the world. The revolution which will transform society and bring in the socialist order is a world-wide affair, a task requiring international cooperation to which we contribute only a part. But our part in this international cooperation is the revolution here at home. We must attend to that, study it and know it. And we can't do that properly unless we know our country and its history and traditions. They are, for the greater part, good. The country itself is good, and so are the great majority of the people in it. Their achievements are many

and great. There is nothing really wrong with the USA except that the wrong people have usurped control of it and are running it into the ditch.

The cure for that is not to throw away the country and its traditions, but to get rid of the usurpers by the process popularized by our forefathers under the name of revolution. This new revolution will have to complete the work started by the men of 1776. They secured the nation's independence. The Second American Revolution of the Sixties, known as the Civil War, smashed the system of chattel slavery, unified the country and opened the way for its unobstructed industrial development. The task of the Third American Revolution is to take this great industrial machine out of the hands of a parasitical clique who operate it for their own benefit, and operate it for the benefit of all.

That's the general idea. But it is not quite as simple as it sounds. There are complications and complexities. The workers have to make their way through a jungle of traps and deceptions. They need a map and a compass. They need a generalization of the experiences of the past and a theoretical guiding line for the future. That's what Marxism is. The American workers will come to Marx, and with him they will be invincible. "Marx will become the mentor of the advanced American workers," said Trotsky. We have the same opinion, and we are working to realize it.

Karl Marx, the German Jew, who lived and worked out his profound theory in England, is native to all countries. The supreme analyst of capitalism is most of all at home in the United States where the development of capitalism has reached its apogee. Marx will help the American workers to know their country, and to change it and make it really their own.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact