

# A fighter for Marxism in America

James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890-1928, by Bryan D. Palmer. University of Illinois Press, 2007, 542 pp.

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The publication of a biography of James P. Cannon, one of the leading figures of early American Communism and the founder, in 1928, of the American Trotskyist movement, is a major event.

Even before his decades in the Trotskyist movement, Cannon was a notable leader. Figures such as William Z. Foster and Earl Browder sought Cannon's collaboration and advice in the early struggles. His role was second to none in some of the crucial internal challenges facing the supporters of the new communist movement in America.

Cannon has been consistently underappreciated. His role in history has been largely ignored, partly the result of predictable academic prejudice, slighting a figure who did not achieve "success" in the conventional sense—who did not succeed to the top post within the American CP as his contemporaries Lovestone, Browder and Foster did.

No other American played such an important role in the international working class movement over so many decades, however. Cannon was a leader of extraordinary talents, as an orator and organizer, and a writer with an indelible flair for popularization and agitation that never descended into demagoguery.

Up to now the main source of material on Cannon's life and struggle has been his own recollections, particularly his memorable interviews with historian Theodore Draper, conducted in a lengthy correspondence over a five-year period in the 1950s. In 1962, these letters became the basis of Cannon's own volume on party history, *The First Ten Years of American Communism*, a remarkable book that has lost none of its appeal and importance to this day.

Draper himself paid an extraordinary compliment to Cannon, writing in the preface to this volume, "Cannon's letters are the real thing. I feel that students of the American labor movement in general and the American communist movement in particular will cherish them for years to come... For a long time, I wondered why Jim Cannon's memory of events in the 1920s was so superior to that of all the others. Was it simply some inherent trait of mind? Rereading some of the letters, I came to the conclusion that it was something more. Unlike other communist leaders of his generation, Jim Cannon *wanted* to remember [emphasis in original]. This portion of his life still lives for him because he has not killed it within himself, and I am happy that I had some part in luring him into making it live for others."

It was with some trepidation that one approached the prospect of the first full-length account of Cannon's life. Would the author be able to do justice to the long-neglected contributions of this important figure?

Happily, this review can report that Bryan Palmer's *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890-1928*, covering the first 38 years of Cannon's life, is a significant contribution. It is a major work of research and scholarship, reflecting a serious commitment

to the history of the working class movement. It will become a vital reference point for the future study of Cannon and the early Communist Party. A second volume will follow, covering the decades in which Cannon led the American supporters of the Fourth International.

Palmer, a Canadian historian who teaches at Trent University in Ontario, has succeeded on a number of levels: in restoring Cannon to the place he deserves in the history of the working class and socialist movement, alongside illustrious predecessors such as Eugene V. Debs and Big Bill Haywood; and in providing, through the story of Cannon's early life and political experiences, an important account of the development of the socialist and communist movement in the United States.

James P. Cannon was born in 1890 in Rosedale, Kansas, a suburb of Kansas City, to Irish immigrant parents who had been born in England and emigrated to the US in the previous decade. They were part of an influx of immigrants that saw nine million arrive in the decade of the 1880s, with similar numbers settling in the US over the next forty years.

The last two decades of the nineteenth century were a time of economic and social upheaval. American capitalism was passing through a period of rapid growth, accompanied by explosive class struggles. As Palmer notes, "before his fifth birthday, a Rosedale boy would have heard talk of shootings at Carnegie's Homestead works; the pardoning of some of the Haymarket martyrs; and the infallible, salvation-like authority of Eugene Debs, who led American railwaymen—quintessential workers of the age—on a justice crusade for the laboring classes."

The immigrant influx transformed the US heartland as well as cities like New York. The newcomers brought with them the ideas of socialism that were inspiring mass movements in Europe. These ideas were not simply an alien import that never took root in America, as is all too often maintained. Eugene Debs received nearly 6 percent of the presidential vote in 1912, and nearly one million votes for president when he ran in 1920, despite his imprisonment for opposing the imperialist war.

Nor was the appeal of socialism confined mostly to New York and a few other large cities, as is sometimes suggested. As this book recounts effectively and in some detail, labor struggles took the most militant form in the Midwest and Western states. Socialist candidates received higher percentages of the vote in such states as Kansas and Wisconsin than they did on the East Coast.

John Cannon, the father of the future socialist leader, was a supporter of Irish Republicanism whose political sympathies progressed from populism to socialism as Cannon was growing up. Publications such as the *International Socialist Review* and *Appeal to Reason* were read in the Cannon household, and the young James P. Cannon took up the novels of Jack London and Upton Sinclair.

At the age of 12, Palmer explains, Cannon left school and began work in

the Kansas City packinghouses. He did not return to school until he was 17, and never completed his high school education. He partly made up for this, however, by educating himself.

Cannon later recalled the influence of a powerful appeal written by Debs in 1906 in defense of Charles Moyer and Big Bill Haywood, jailed on frame-up charges in Idaho after the assassination of a former governor. Around this time Cannon heard Debs speak, and it also made an indelible impression on the 16-year-old.

Cannon joined the Socialist Party in 1908, but later dated his revolutionary commitment to his decision to join the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in 1911. He got his early political education and experience in the school of revolutionary syndicalism, with Vincent St. John as one of his primary teachers.

Cannon undertook trips to flashpoints of struggle in Akron, Ohio; Peoria, Illinois and Duluth, Minnesota between 1911 and 1913. His aptitude for public speaking, first manifested in his high school debating society a few years earlier, impressed St. John and others. Cannon began to display the qualities of leadership that were to mature inside the Communist Party and later in the Trotskyist movement. Palmer's detailed treatment of Cannon's early years, based on years of patient and persistent research, adds much to our knowledge of the man.

The devotion to the cause of syndicalism and socialism created complications in Cannon's personal life, as described by Palmer. In high school, he met Lista Makimson, one of his teachers and nearly seven years his senior. He and Lista were to marry in 1913, but despite her socialist sympathies, the exigencies of the struggle, especially Cannon's frequent long absences, created difficulties that led, some years later, to an amicable separation.

The biggest influence and turning point in shaping Cannon's life was the Russian Revolution of 1917. The October Revolution, establishing the world's first workers' state, crystallized growing doubts in Cannon's mind on the limitations of the IWW's syndicalism. He rejoined the Socialist Party through its left wing, attending the National Left Wing Convention in June 1919, and later that year joined the newly founded Communist Labor Party, one of three rival communist parties established in this turbulent period.

There are two opposed schools of historiography on American communism. One sees the Communist Party as the mechanical instrument of Moscow domination, inevitably alien to American life and conditions. Another school, associated with what has generally been termed the New Left, has sought to emphasize the native roots of American Communism and its positive political role in the struggle for reforms, and especially in its Popular Front alliance with American liberalism and the Democratic Party during the New Deal years and the Second World War.

Both of these schools of thought agree on one crucial question— that revolutionary Marxism had no application to the United States. The anti-communists see the whole project of building an international revolutionary party as a fruitless or even dangerous utopia. This outlook mars even the conscientious work of Theodore Draper, whose two-volume history, *The Roots of American Communism and American Communism and Soviet Russia*, benefited so much from his above-mentioned correspondence with Cannon. The New Lefts essentially agree, and suggest that the American Communists were derailed by Moscow's influence and should have openly embraced national reformism without the encumbrance of the Soviet Union.

Palmer rejects both of these approaches. He insists, and correctly so, on studying the first decade of the US Communist Party as the effort of self-sacrificing and committed revolutionists, and in relationship to international developments and, in particular, the fate of the Russian Revolution and the Communist International.

The 1917 Revolution in Russia, far from a purely national event, was the outcome of the crisis of world capitalism, which broke at its weakest link

when the Bolsheviks took power. The class struggle and political crisis accentuated by the imperialist war also found dramatic expression in the United States. As Palmer reports, strikes in the US more than doubled in the 1916-1921 period, in comparison to earlier years. The Russian Revolution only deepened the radicalization that was already underway. The years 1918 and 1919 witnessed the great steel strike, transit strikes in Chicago, Denver and elsewhere, the famous Seattle general strike and other struggles.

Cannon was an active participant in this movement, both in the eruptions of class conflict and in the effort to build a mass revolutionary party of the working class.

The upsurge of the class struggle coincided with a period of savage government repression of radicals and immigrant workers. Thousands were jailed or deported in the Palmer Raids of 1919-1920—the response of the US ruling class to the threat of revolutionary ideas and organization.

The newly-organized American Communists faced enormous difficulties, including the imprisonment of many of their leaders and members. Cannon himself was jailed for 60 days in connection with a rank-and-file miners' rebellion in Kansas in 1920.

The circumstances required that revolutionaries utilize methods of illegality, but Cannon and others fought bitterly against the ultra-left tendencies that based themselves on "illegality as a principle." Long after legal organization became possible, the sectarians who dominated the leaderships of the large, foreign-language federations insisted on methods which made it virtually impossible for the new movement to reach broader sections of native-born workers.

Cannon played a leading role in this period in the complicated efforts to unite the splintered American supporters of the newly formed Communist International. He was one of the most indefatigable champions of the twin goals of legalization and Americanization of the movement. The foreign-language leaders, although they contributed financially and in terms of propaganda to the new movement, manifested their own narrow nationalism insofar as they belittled the revolutionary potential of the American working class and the need to root the movement amongst these layers.

Cannon chaired the December 1921 convention that established the Workers Party as the legal and above-ground voice of American Communism. This was followed by another year, however, in which the "undergrounders" continued to seek the subordination of the legal party to the parallel illegal organization. Cannon spent much of 1922 in Moscow as a delegate to the Communist International. This sojourn culminated in the historic meeting held by Cannon and Max Bedacht with Trotsky, after which Trotsky quickly made clear his agreement with the proposal for the full legalization of the American party.

The 1922 Congress was to be the last international gathering of a healthy Comintern, however. It was followed by Lenin's long illness and death in January 1924. The revolutionary opportunity in Germany in 1923 was missed, and inside the USSR the process by which the growing Soviet bureaucracy was to strangle the Bolshevik Party and the Communist International was well underway.

Palmer does a mostly admirable job of following the somewhat dizzying twists and turns of the movement in this period. The victory for complete legalization at the Fourth Congress of the Communist International was followed almost immediately by new complications and problems for the young movement. John Pepper, a Hungarian-born Comintern emissary, emerged as a destructive force in the leadership of the American CP. Pepper is associated above all with the notorious 1923 adventure in which the Communist Party combined elements of both opportunism and adventurism in its support for the Chicago conference that inaugurated a stillborn Farmer Labor Party.

The Cannon-Foster [William Z. Foster] bloc was formed inside the party during this time. Factional warfare became more and more the norm,

alongside unprincipled and malicious interventions by the increasingly Stalinized Comintern, whose aim was no longer the development of mature revolutionary leadership, but rather the installation of pliable hand-raisers who owed their position to Moscow and could be expected to obey instructions that conformed to the interests of the expanding Stalinist bureaucracy.

The notorious Parity Commission in 1925, through which Stalinist operative Sergei Gusev installed the Ruthenberg-Lovestone leadership in the American party, although it did not represent a majority elected by the party membership, led to Cannon's break with Foster, followed by Cannon's turn to labor defense work with the formation of the International Labor Defense.

The ILD, under Cannon's guidance, was to play a heroic and historic role in the unsuccessful fight to save Sacco and Vanzetti from execution. The work of the ILD, founded in 1925, merits an entire chapter in Palmer's account, and is among his most effective depictions of the period and of Cannon's role.

As Palmer explains, the ILD "brought out the best in Cannon." Although it is best known for its campaign on behalf of Sacco and Vanzetti, it also, in Palmer's words, "challenged anti-labor legislation and the arbitrary use of court injunctions against workers; provided legal aid to those facing trial and sentencing; educated the labor movement and the wider public about the extent of class persecution in the United States; was committed to united-front cooperation and building solidarity of all defense forces, national and international; struck repeated blows against racist brutality and lynching; and continued the Comintern-inspired project of exposing the nature of white terror in other capitalist countries."

Cannon made his share of mistakes during the years of permanent factionalism inside the CP. "When I came out of the nine years of the CP, I was a first-class factional hoodlum," he was later to explain. Yet Cannon did emerge, and he did survive as a revolutionary. This can be explained by the fact that, despite the mistakes, Cannon never wavered on the fundamental programmatic issues that had brought him into the revolutionary movement.

He was an internationalist who recognized that genuine internationalism required the fight to unite Marxist theory and practice, to make socialist principles and perspective live in the actual struggles of the American working class. While the other CP leaders tended toward sectarian abstention on the one hand, or parochialism, provincialism and opportunist maneuvers on the other, Cannon sought to genuinely learn from the leaders of the Russian Revolution.

When the Stalinized Comintern sought more and more to exploit the weaknesses of the American Communists, Cannon became uneasy and, even if in a confused way, sought some way out of the growing morass of factionalism, partly by throwing himself into the work of the International Labor Defense.

Cannon later made an assessment of the period of unrestrained factional warfare in the mid-1920s which, unlike the self-serving accounts of others, sought to explain the crisis objectively and did not absolve himself of all responsibility. The American CP, like other young parties around the world, faced a situation in which world capitalism had achieved a temporary restabilization, while in the Soviet Union a growing conservative mood was exploited by the rising bureaucracy inside the party and the state apparatus. This combined to produce disorientation and moods of discouragement among party members, which helped to fuel the unprincipled factionalism.

The volume ends with the aftermath of the Sixth Congress of the Comintern, where Cannon was present as a member of the American delegation, and where he read Trotsky's seminal *Criticism of the Draft Program*. Cannon was faced with an enormous political decision. The Opposition document, after years of an official campaign of slander against Trotsky, the co-leader of the Russian Revolution, hit Cannon with

the force of a thunderbolt. He discussed it with Canadian delegate Maurice Spector, and it was smuggled out of the Soviet Union and back to the US. There he had discussions with his companion and fellow party leader Rose Karsner, and also with close comrades Max Shachtman and Martin Abern.

Some observers have suggested that Cannon's decision to support the Left Opposition was motivated by "career" considerations, as his faction had reached a dead end in the inner-party maneuvers. Palmer clearly rejects this conclusion.

As he demonstrates, there were definite signs before the 1928 Congress of Cannon's increasing dissatisfaction with the permanent factionalism, and Cannon later forthrightly explained his role and responsibility. Palmer quotes Cannon: "The foot-loose Wobbly rebel that I used to be had imperceptibly begun to fit comfortably into a swivel chair, protecting himself in his seat by small maneuvers and evasions, and even permitting himself a certain conceit about his adroit accommodation to this shabby game. I saw myself for the first time as another person, as a revolutionist who was on the road to becoming a *bureaucrat*. The image was hideous, and I turned away from it in disgust." [Emphasis in original].

Having painfully but decisively broken with some of his longtime collaborators, particularly William F. Dunne, Cannon and a handful of supporters were expelled in October 1928. This was soon followed by gangster attacks by Stalinist thugs in attempts to prevent discussion and frighten away potential supporters.

Despite these desperate methods, Cannon was able to assemble a small but important force of some 100 supporters of the newly-formed Communist League of America, a number that was to double in size over the next several years and was to play a major role, out of all proportion to its numbers, in the explosive struggles of the 1930s in the United States, as well as in the battle to found the Fourth International.

The massive research embodied in this volume, reflected, in part, in the 155 pages of footnotes, leaves little unexplored. The exhaustive account of the factional warfare is necessary, but there are moments when the mass of detail veils the essential developments and the account becomes somewhat diffuse—when the factional trees obscure the forest of historical perspective, so to speak.

It may be understandable, given that the American party leaders paid little attention to international developments in this period, that Palmer came across relatively little dealing with these subjects in his research. Nevertheless, these developments are crucial to understanding what took place inside the American CP.

The presentation would have been strengthened if some discussion on the theoretical struggles taking place inside the Bolshevik Party had been presented earlier in this volume than the chapter dealing with the Sixth Comintern Congress. Even a brief discussion of the Left Opposition's struggle in relation to Germany, Britain and China, for instance, would have better shown the roots of the disorientation plaguing the American Communists.

These are relatively minor weaknesses, however. Cannon emerges from these pages as a living figure, a contradictory and in some ways enigmatic one. He was an autodidact who early on demonstrated not only the talent for working with others for which he became well known, but also the speaking and writing abilities that are an enormous part of his revolutionary legacy.

Cannon had what even his later political opponents described as an unerring "feeling" for the proletariat, yet he also quietly wrote autobiographical fiction in the 1950s, as Palmer reports, and was quite capable of collaborating with semi-bohemian intellectuals, writers and poets like Max Eastman.

Describing himself and his co-thinkers later in life as "Wobblies who had learned something," Cannon embodied and also transcended the achievements of such figures as Debs and Haywood. He expressed in his

personality and articulated in his words and writings the revolutionary traditions and potential of the American working class in ways that his contemporaries could not.

William Z. Foster, with his trade union fetishism, and Jay Lovestone, the consummate petty-bourgeois maneuverer and factionalist, went on to become, in Foster's case, the hopelessly compromised Stalinist functionary, and, in Lovestone's, the unabashed defender of American imperialism and adviser to the CIA. Cannon left an entirely different and immeasurably greater legacy.

The second volume of this biography will have the difficult task of summing up the last 40-odd years of Cannon's long life. This was a period encompassing, among other developments, the American Trotskyists' leadership of the Minneapolis general strike; the founding of the Socialist Workers Party and of the Fourth International; the 1941 conviction of Cannon and other SWP leaders under the Smith Act; and Cannon's role in 1953 in issuing The Open Letter to the world Trotskyist movement, which founded the International Committee of the Fourth International.

How Bryan Palmer deals with the fundamental issues of program and perspective that confronted the Trotskyist movement remains to be seen. Judging from this first part of this biography, however, his approach is serious and honest, and one looks forward on that basis to his next and concluding volume on Cannon's life.

*The new biography of James P. Cannon can be purchased through the publisher at <http://www.press.uillinois.edu/f06/palmer.html>*



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